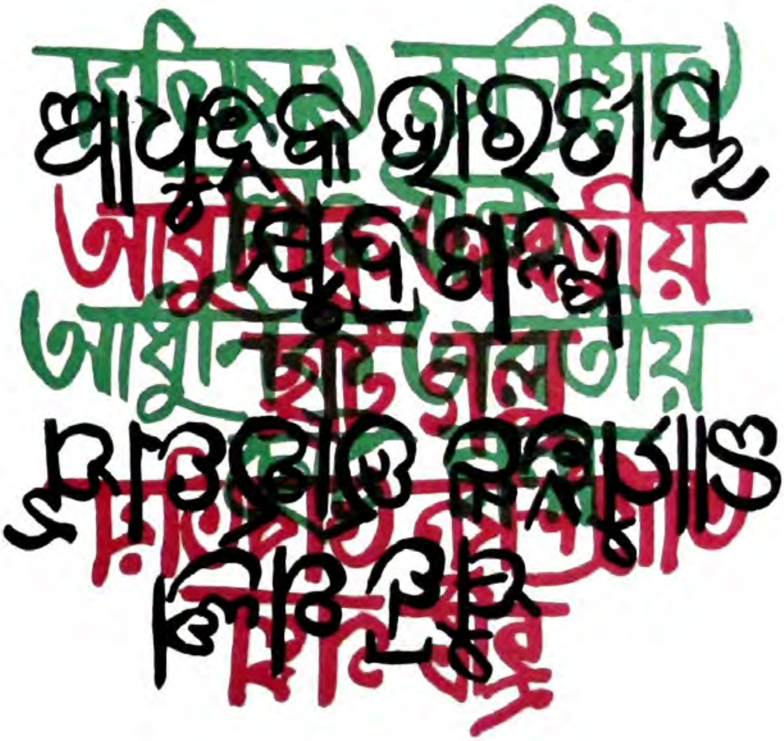
VOLUME FOUR

MODERN INDIAN SHORT STORIES

ASSAMESE
BENGALI
ORIYA



EDITOR: **KISHORI CHARAN DAS**

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MODERN INDIAN SHORT STORIES

THE present volume is fourth and final in a series of collections of short stories from different regions of India, written originally in the respective Indian languages and rendered into English. The three preceding volumes covered the northern, western and southern regions. Selected short stories from the eastern region—six each in Assamese, Bengali and Oriya—are brought together in this volume, arranged in chronological order of the authors. The stories there are too few to be representative of the entire gamut of post-independence short-story writing in the eastern region, but offer a rewarding glimpse of the varied modes and perceptions in this genre. The volume carries an introduction by the editor as also brief biographical notes on the authors.

KISHORI CHARAN DAS, editor of this volume of short stories, is an eminent writer from Orissa and a senior civil servant in his late fifties. He has been writing poems, short stories and essays—both in Oriya and English—for over thirty-five years. His forte is the short story, of which he has published eight collections in Oriya to date. He has besides published a collection of poems in English. His works have been published in translations in several Indian and foreign languages at home and abroad. He is the recipient of many awards and distinctions, including the awards of the Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters) and the Orissa Sahitya Akademi. He now lives in Gauhati, Assam.

Rs 35

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The short-story writers in this volume are:

ASSAMESE

Syed Abdul Malik
Jogesh Das
Mahim Bora
Bhabendra Nath Saikia
Nirupama Borgohain
Mamoni Raison Goswami

BENGALI

Tarashankar Bandyopadhyaya
Balaichand Mukhopadhyaya "Banaphul"
Sm. Ashapurna Debi
Manik Bandyopadhyay
Samaresh Basu
Sunil Gangopadhyaya

ORIYA

Gopinath Mohanty
Sachi Rautroy
Kishori Charan Das
Manoj Das
Krushna Prasad Mishra
Chaudhury Hemakanta Misra

THIS series as a whole parallels the volumes of poetry published under the title *Indian Poetry Today*.

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MODERN INDIAN SHORT STORIES

ASSAMESE
BENGALI
ORIYA

Editor : KISHORI CHARAN DAS

INDIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS

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Kanti Roy

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Introduction

IN attempting a compilation of short stories from the eastern region of India, it is important to mention, at the outset, that we are not setting apart a portion of the country, sizeable as it may be, just for the sake of convenience. We are dealing not merely with a contiguous land area overly favoured and harassed by the monsoons, washed by the Bay of Bengal, and topped by the Himalayas. We are also concerned with a distinctive personality, relevant to the making of literature. The verdant plains, the swollen rivers, the waving gold of the rice-fields, the dense forests and the abundant flora and fauna offer, as it were, an intenser backdrop to the cultural expressions, inducing a heightened note of joy and anguish. Secondly, being a border region open only to the seas and mountains, till the partition created easy access over land frontiers it carries a certain impress of contacts with the outside world over many centuries, without having to suffer violent changes, as in the west, from alien invasions. And, tangibly, the most important of them all is the fact that the languages of literature in this region have been derived from a common source, the Magadhi Prakrit, which branched off from Sanskrit as a spoken dialect and later as a literary vehicle in the early

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Middle Ages. To the north-east it developed into northern Bengali and Assamese, to the south into Oriya, and between the two into Bengali. The common dialect current in North Bengal and Assam continued as one speech till about the 15th century when Assamese started on an independent literary career, having imbibed in the meanwhile, several words and phrases of Indo-Chinese origin. Later, the Bengali and Oriya languages absorbed quite a few words of Persian origin from the court-language of the rulers, when the area came under the administration of the Moguls. And then, of course, the recent history of the British presence which influenced the thoughts and ideas, as also the modes and manner of literature in no small measure. Lastly, one must add that the traumatic experience of Partition has failed to delink Bengali, as spoken in Bangladesh, from the mainstream of Indo-Aryan languages and as such, from the eastern heritage which survives till today as a distinct literary idiom, soft, sonorous and Sanskritic, in the fascinating tapestry of the literatures of the sub-continent.

But talking of modern literature, which can be said to have gained a remarkable impetus after Independence, and has been featured accordingly in this anthology, there is a nagging question that needs to be answered for the benefit of the enlightened and critical readers. Granting that there is a distinct cultural milieu in the eastern region, which would be equally true of many such regions in the country, does the written literature of today really reflect the distinction, except in the locale, colour and atmosphere, to the extent the writer chooses to employ those devices for effect ? Would it not be true to say that our literature, written in the many languages of India, communicates the thoughts and perceptions of the English-educated and essentially urban intelligentsia, which is the same all over the country ? And in so far as distinctions go, would it not be honest to admit that they are more class-oriented than regional ? That is, the peasants all over India or for that matter the artisans and traders are linked to each other in ways of living as also in emotional behaviour, much more than what divides them in language, and are equally removed from the educated elite of their respective regions ? These are valid questions which cannot be wished away. However, one would say, in justification of regional groupings such as this, that a) regional-cum-linguistic identities are legitimately being nurtured as a many-coloured splendour of national life, whereas every effort is being made to create an egalitarian society, and b) some writers, at least, have been bold enough to enter into the lives of the masses, past the romanticism and sentimentalism of yesteryears, and there is every reason to believe that the trend will continue. In other words, the reader needs to be warned that while these regional groupings are logical—and the logic of the Eastern group is impeccable as I have explained earlier—one should not look for intrinsic differences in

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thought-content and attitudes, nor manage to forget that all literature is middle-class, and perphaps a little more so in India, as of now.

Coming to the mechanics of the compilation, I have followed generally the pattern adopted in the previous volumes representing other regions, by taking an equal number of stories from each region, irrespective of the available output in each. The merits of the selections have been brought out briefly along with a narration of the trends in story-telling in the current century, tracing from the beginnings of prose literature, which do not go very far in the past. While the stories are from authors who are distinguished and are fairly representative of the writing over the last three decades and more, I must add that there are some others, no less distinguished and representative, whom I have had to leave out for a variety of reasons. For one thing, I had to limit myself to a certain size and number. Secondly, English translations of some were not available inspite of best efforts, and it was not possible, except in a few cases, to arrange for fresh translations. However, I have made a mention of these eminent writers in the Introduction, touching upon their contribution to modern fiction and to the short story, in particular, in the respective language. I hope I have not missed any, but I would crave the indulgence of the readers, if I have.

And before passing on to the narration language-wise, I may be permitted to add that I am essentially a creative writer, and not an academician. This should, I hope, take care of my failings and also induce the readers to look kindly on some of my views which may appear to be much too positive, based as they are on my own preferences, which I could not eschew in favour of academic wisdom.

II

The short story of Assam began to take shape with L.N. Bezboruah in the second decade of the twentieth century, though fiction had been established as a literary form much earlier in the seventies of the last century, thanks to the efforts of the Baptist missionaries. In fact prose as such, had developed as religious and chronicle literature in the 17th and 18th centuries, to an extent unmatched in neighbouring Bengal and Orissa. The modern Assamese novel shorn of religious trappings came into being with the romanticized historical novels of P.N. Gohain-Barua and Rajani Bardoloi in the late nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century. Rajani Bardoloi can well be compared to Bankim Chandra Chatterji of Bengal both in style and thematic content (he has himself acknowledged the influence of his illustrious contemporary) while

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both of them owe to a common British model in the fiction of Sir Walter Scott. Bezboruah came a little later and took the literary world by storm with successive volumes of short stories in the first few years after 1910 dealing with plebeian characters and situations which had not been adopted so far as proper material for literature. One is tempted to compare him with Fakirmohan Senapati of Orissa, who flourished at about the same time, though Fakirmohan was more of a novelist than a writer of short stories. Like Fakirmohan, Bezbarua depicted the laughable snobbery of a certain class of people, including the anglicized ones, along with the joys and sorrows of God's good men, the simple peasants of the country side. And he too emyloyed humour, though less barbed than that of Fakirmohan, in driving the point home. Interestingly they also seem to share the same weaknesses, namely, looseness in construction, a certain lack of artistic restraint in expression, and a penchant for stock characters, charmingly exaggerated in their social attitudes and behaviour. Of the story-tellers who came immediately after, Sarat Goswami and Dr. S.K. Bhuyan deserve special mention for having raised the stature of the short story, in modern terms. With Goswami, there was a welcome change in emphasis from the excitement of events to the fascination of characters, while Bhuyan took characterizations to levels of appraisal, if not analysis, which had not been attained before. The short story so far was however mostly of the narrative kind and the writer did not take care to project his own mind into the telling of the tale. The change came with the *Awahon* era, so called after the journal of that name started by Nagendra Narayan Chowdhury. It was a period of joyous creativity in a romantic vein. The romanticism, it must be said, was more earthy than ethereal, but it was no where near realism in the accepted sense of the term. Lakshmidher Sharma was a writer who belonged to this period but was essentially different, in as much as he raised the voice of social protest to a pitch which did hardly conform to the quietist temper of the thirties. His "Vidrohini", the story of rebellious challenge by a young widow is considered to be a path finder in this genre. He reminds one of Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi of Orissa, the younger brother of Kalindi Charan Panigrahi who during his short life left us with a few stories, not like any other in his time, which are yet to be matched in revolutionary fervour. But social awareness, as such, was not lacking in the fiction of the *Awahon* era. Mahi Bora was one who dealt effectively with the lives and loves in the lower middle-class society in a tone of engaging warmth. Trailokya Goswami was another who made an overt plea in favour of the wronged and the fallen, but he was more sad than angry and believed in the happy days to come. With H. R. Deka we find a newer note of irony which anticipates, sometimes, the cynicism of today. Lakshminath Fukan, a noted social worker did not allow, expectedly, any diffusion in the social focus; but in terms

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of story-telling he will be remembered for having introduced a good measure of the rural idiom, which was a stride forward in realism. For subtleties of the psychological approach one should note the contributions of Munin Barkataki and Krishna Bhuyan. But perhaps the most popular among them all, in the *Awahon* era, was Roma Das, for she could provide psychological insights in a palpable framework of romanticism, which appealed to a larger audience. And then we come to the era after the world war and Independence when this frontier state had more than its normal share of flux, anxiety and promise. The short story had necessarily to evolve to levels of greater complexity and imbibe a new temper. The stories for the compilation belong to this period.

My first story is by Syed Abdul Malik, a prolific story-teller who has taken in a large variety of characters and has made them operate in developing situations leading to denouements one would not ordinarily foresee. This shows him for a master craftsman in the same class as "Banaphul", his illustrious contemporary in neighbouring Bengal. Perhaps there is one point of distinction in that Abdul Malik is a little more explicit than his counterpart who revels in irony and suggestiveness. One would think that the mature artist as he is, he could not yet shake off the romantic hangover of the *Awahon* era, no matter if he appeared to do so. And inspite of the transparent realism in setting and atmosphere he was a moralist too, which takes him back to the company of "Banaphul", and by the same token nearer to Chekhov who possibly inspired them both. The story I have taken is one of the simplest from the pen of Abdul Malik, the romantic liberal, and proclaims his credo, as no other story would. For here the "failing" of compassion is shown to be ineffably a part of human nature, extending to dumb animals, if not fellow-humans, which needs to be awakened, as it were, by certain dramatic, moments in life. The next story is by Jogesh Das, a powerful contemporary writer who can be said to have forsworn romanticism. To start with, his language is deceptively simple, without the frills and flourishes which were used by many earlier writers for garnishing truth as they saw it. Secondly, his evident social sympathies for the underdog are expressed in a manner which makes it appear that it is indeed a dismal situation, though he does not want to make an issue of it. In effect he adopts a positively non-romantic stance which cannot be faulted, atleast as an antidote to the overly romantic tradition that had persisted in an age which was increasingly anxious and troubled. The story selected here, "The Death of a Banana Boat" stands out as a biting commentary on the self-serving kindness of the gentlefolk, but does not imply, necessarily, that Dhania, recipient of the kindness is entirely a loser, even though his banana boat, which could get emancipated if a Tulsi leaf were floated away on it, as the Assamese saying goes, is saved in a wrong way. One could not ask of the artist a more muted statement

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of morals, social abuse or what have you. Mahim Bora, who has written the third story does not differ in essence from the social sympathies of Jogesh Das. He too writes, generally of the small man and his sufferings. But he is more intense, and his characters are sharply etched, a device that lends dignity to the small man as an individual, and not merely a representative of his class. In his story "Three Minus Three", the ways of the man, his family and the bananas are given in such vibrant detail that poverty does not seem to have an ugly face, and even the wild laughter at the end of the story is of a piece with the laughter with which the man had greeted the morning sun. How does one pity such a person even when he finds that Three Minus Three is indeed an appalling zero ? The next story is by Bhaben Saikia with whom modernism ceases to be lovable in as much as it refuses to accept the assumptions of beauty, nobility and such-like virtues in suffering, regardless of whether it is caused by poverty or acts of God. The writer throws a pitiless searchlight on the condition of man and seems to say, as in the words of a modern critic, that the tragedy of social abuse is but a part of the tragedy of being born. In his story "Rats", the small woman could not have suffered a more grievous loss, but we are reminded of the fact that she is small not merely in the social scale but also being human, and has to reckon with the gnawings of the rats, the relentless yearnings of the flesh. My next two stories are from two women writers, Nirupama Borgohain and Mamoni Goswami who appear to have continued with the feast of psychological insights made respectable by Bhaben Saikia. The caption of Nirupama's story "Tantalus" gives away the theme, namely the twilight misery of the modern man. But one wonders if she betrays a feminine surge of sentiment or favours us with a slice of middle class susceptibility which must suffer with the deprived, and yet feel helpless about it. The reaction suggests to us variously, conforming, as it were, to the ambiguity of the misery. Mamoni Goswami, however, makes it clear that there can be no reason for charging her with sentimentalism, and she has no qualms about showing the human condition in living, and therefore lurid colours. It is relevant to add here that in these stories from Assam there is a rich scent of the flora and fauna of the region. Among others the bamboo grove and the ubiquitous banana provide a certain atmosphere, dark green, luscious and moisture-laden which seems to go well with the emotive situations. Mamoni Goswami goes further and offers us the dark jungles of Assam, appropriate indeed to the erupting of passions and violence, as in her story "Dwarka and His Gun", taken for the compilation.

The modern trend, in its various connotations has come a long way in Assam. For reasons I have referred to earlier it has not been possible to include quite a few in this compilation. Of them I must make a a special mention of some who should be counted among the outstanding

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and without whom a study of the short story in contemporary Assamese literature would be incomplete. The stories of Biren Bhattacharya, the noted nevelist and winner of Jnanpith Award are not many, but in these he provides us with a deep perception of the world of hillmen and peasants, which gains amplitude in his novels of grand dimensions, reminiscent of Gopinath Mohanty of Orissa. Saurabh Kumar Chaliha is an eminent writer, contemporaneous with Bhaben Saikia, who has depicted urban situations faithfully and in vivid strokes. He is also noted for an effective use of new technical devices deriving strength from impressions rather than factual details, and he is in that sense a path-finder for the young writers of today. Homen Borgohain, the husband of Nirupama Bargohain is a pioneer in introducing stories which are overtly Freudian, providing insights into the pathology of the human mind. And Laxminandan Bora offers a refreshing change with his humour, part sarcasm, as a means of exposing the hypocrisies of the modern man in the guise of progress. Of the very young writers who have sought to project ideas in newer modes of expression, Nagen Saikia and Apurba Sharma seem to be writers of considerable promise.

Concluding the Assamese scene one cannot but be painfully aware of the present socio-political situation in the region, which cannot leave literature untouched. It is however to be hoped that Assam which has a long tradition of achieving fusion of diverse races and cultures will emerge again as a grand achiever, and the literature of the future will be richer yet by the traumatic experience of today.

III

Bengal had the earliest exposure to western culture, which helped the English-educated elite to derive intellectual satisfaction from rational prose as distinguished from tales in verse framed for the sake of music and moral edification. Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838—1894), an intensely nationalist civil servant introduced this change in a big way, after trying his hand for sometime in the English language. He can be considered to be the first novelist as also the first short-story writer of Bengal, though at this stage of development the short story was, understandably, like a condensed novel and dealt more with exciting events than with interesting characters. The characters in fact were larger than life corresponding to grandiose themes concerned with the forces of history and society. He was followed by Rabindranath Tagore (1861—1941) known well beyond the limits of Bengal and India as a poet, who brought structural refinements in the telling of a story, avoiding verbiage

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and emotional overtones, and thus bringing out the merits of a short story as distinguished from a long narrative. Perhaps being a major poet, he could afford to keep his short fiction in reasonable trim as a counterpoint to the indulgences of verse, and yet, as in "Kabuliwallah", "Castaway" and many other stories, inveigle the universal sorrows to scintillate in a petite framework of sentiments. However Bengali fiction came to earth only with Sarat Chandra Chatterji. He is considered by quite a few modern critics as being steeped in middle-class values, revelling in muted twilight sentiments, as distinct from the heroic sensibilities of Bankim Chandra. There could be some truth in this criticism, but this is also a measure of modernism that Sarat Chandra introduced in Bengali fiction. That a writer does not have to get away from the failings of his class ; that his characters do not always have to be mouth-pieces of ideas and ideals ; and that in inter-personal situations sentiments, more than grand passions, are closer to reality. In the social context he is also the first writer who got involved not only with the petite bourgeoisie of towns and villages, but with the discards of the society, the drunks, outcastes and prostitutes, who are more sinned against than sinning. Nevertheless he was basically a romantic, and not a realist. While he did come down to earth, he avoided or possibly shunned the perceptions of ugliness, and his characters, weak as they might be in some cases, were never contemptible. It may also be added that though his influence on later fiction, in general, was significant he was himself more of a novelist than a writer of short stories.

These were the three greats of Bengali literature who have provided the modern story-teller in Bengal with the benefit of an impressive, if not formidable, tradition which he must continue or contend with in the light of social and political happenings, as also of his personal predilections. The vast wealth of Bengali fiction since Sarat Chandra is such that even in the limited area of short stories it is not possible to give within the scope of this compilation, more than tantalizing glimpses of the diverse trends in thematic and technical development. Apart from those whose stories have been selected, one could name a large number of writers who have made significant contribution to the art of story-telling in modern Bengal. Pramatha Chowdhary and Rajasekhar Bose introduced a new liveliness in fiction by wit and irony, and anticipated, in this regard, the later master Banaphul. Bibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyaya, the writer of "Pather Panchali", made into a film-classic of that name by Satyajit Ray, brought the saga of rural Bengal into focus, in brave and tragic dimensions. Manoje Basu excelled, and may be said to have revived, frank portrayals of romantic love. For sheer humour Pramathanath Bisi blazed a trail which continues to inspire present-day writers in that genre. Buddhadeva Basu shocked the "refined" sensibilities of society by his bold appreciation of sex as an aspect

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of truth and gave a powerful impetus to realism in modern fiction. Sailajananda Mukherji took realism forward in another direction by his vivid account of the sufferings of the working classes. He was followed in this regard, by Narayan Gangopadhyaya, an intense committed writer, who depicted the horrors of social exploitation with little regard for the niceties of artistic restraint and is one of those who helped in transmuting social protest into anger. Achintya Kumar Sengupta embellished the facts of human relationship by poetic elegances of expression while Premendra Mitra, covering the same area, took characterization to newer heights by the depth of his perceptions. Narendranath Mitra, a highly skilful writer of short stories employed images and atmosphere to devastating effect. He is matched in popularity by Subodh Ghosh who brought to bear in his stories a wealth of personal experience in various professions, considered to be petty in the social scale, in a framework of deep social consciousness. Of later writers, special mention may be made of Bimal Mitra for his telling sarcasm of the philistines and frauds of modern society and of "Shankar" for his panoramic treatment of the human cavalcade. And for a certain intellectual cynicism Sirshendu Mukhopadhyaya would perhaps represent the ultra-modern. Among other writers of today Kamal Mazumdar and Dibyendu Palit show great promise in involving new forms and attitudes of expression. The list is by no means exhaustive, but would perhaps help the reader to appreciate the merits of the selected stories, in the proper perspective.

Tarashankar Bandyopadhyaya who contributes the first story in the Bengali section of this compilation was with us till recently in 1971, when he died at the age of 73. He was the grand old man of modern Bengali fiction who adhered to the classical simplicities of telling a story in a simple and yet grand manner without losing grip, in his penchant for situations, over the central character shown to operate in his own unique dimensions. In this story there is a special dimension too, that of the river Mayurakshi,—yet another river of Gangetic India, lesser known but no less mighty—the beneficent Mother who shapes the lives of the boatman and his like, but can be unaccountably vicious, causing the exercise of choices *In extremis*. laying bare the pretensions of the puny man to claims of love, intelligence, and what have you. At the end it appears as if the boatman let it be known that he could be no less pitiless than the Mother. It is the story of a tragedy in the manner of the classical Greeks, even as the artifacts of life lived in the familiar riverine countryside of Bengal are brought out in vivid colours. The next story is by Balaichand Mukhopadhyaya, known popularly as "Banaphul" who was one of the most prolific writers of modern Bengal and reduced story-telling into an exquisite art, calling all irony to take over from sentiment in gentle undertones of compassion, in the manner of European masters such as Maupassant,

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Chekhov, and others. I have however chosen the story "Tilottoma not so much to illustrate his delectable tone and style, but his handling of a moral situation in the male-oriented society of middle-class Bengal before Independence, when a woman was considered to be no more than a mere woman—a goddess perhaps, if she could play the role—whose sole purpose on earth was to bring pleasures and progeny to her husband. The story does not induce us to hate the average male of a husband, but helps us to appreciate, as it were, the incredible reality of the traditional Indian woman, with whom goodness could be an exasperating habit, apt to drive the husband to odd acts of self-denial. I would like to stress here that Banaphul, the master of irony, was never amoral and in this he was no different from all other modern writers of India who have clung to a statement of values, howsoever muted, till recently when cyni-cism has dislodged irony, and there are a little too many rebels without cause. The moral aspect would also perhaps place him nearer Chekhov than Maupassant and his followers such as Somerset Maugham. The motif of Indian womanhood recurs in my third story from Bengal, written by Sm. Ashapurna Debi, a housewife with little pretensions to scholar-ship who has received a few years back, the prestigious Jnanpith literary award for her novel "Pratham Pratisruti", noted among other things, for its unabashed accent on the feminine ego. The ego is not passive in this story either, for the long-suffering lady does not merely accept the situation, she acts obstinate. Does she have to stretch her devotion to the insane husband to a "point beyond the limit"? The denouement provides the answer, artistically perfect and terrible, making it appear that she can indeed go beyond the limits of the possible, for the sake of the entire clan and you need not waste your sympathies on the tragedienne. From the heroism, or masochism if you will, of the Indian womanhood to the ugliness and horror of a life lived outside the pale of society. Manik Bandyopadhyay was one of those committed writers who never compro-mised with certain facts of social reality, hoping you would rise in anger. In this story there is no direct exposure of the social iniquities, nor any indictment of the exploiting classes. It is a bare story of beggars and criminals, with no plot but a searing climax, that puts to shame a society which has given rise to a human condition, no better than the worst among animals, in which virtues such as pity, decency and kindness have lost all meaning. But if passions make beasts of men, why point an accusing finger only at society? What about the passions generated by political forces released in the name of virtues such as religion and nationalism? Bengal unfortunately, has had its fill of such eruptions in the wake of Partition, more before than after, during which ordinary men and women were caught in an unprecedented frenzy of killing each other. Samaresh Basu, one of the most popular contemporary writers, gives us a simplistically human story "Adab" to restore the confidence of man as a

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human being, in the backdrop of one such riot. The revelation is by no means surprising, and is yet reassuring, namely that the heart of a Hindu does bleed for a Muslim and vice-versa when they find themselves together as mere individuals savouring of their private joys and sorrows and not as a part of the mighty mobs and movements. But the individuals do not matter, the story seems to say, to the tune of the decisive shots from a revolver and the spilling of much blood soaking a pitiful bundle of clothes. My last story for the Bengali section is ultra-modern, fairly representative of current writing and the author is Sunil Gangopadhyaya, a versatile writer who has made it his business to probe into human thought and conduct, in varying tones of humour and sarcasm, which without being harsh, does not help the image of Man handed down to us by our prophets and forefathers. Nothing happens in this story. But does anything ever happen in the existentialist mode of living?—, a modern critic would say, and one could not agree more. The tone of mockery in raising trifies to heroic proportions, such as the heroine threatening to commit suicide on account of a scurrilous letter addressed to her, for she is a 'sweet and simple girl', and the hero going out in fear and trembling to meet the villain who obliges him by greater cowardice, introduces us to the current concept of the anti-hero, a contemptible person who can be amusing till you realise that he is no different from the likes of you. A general attitude of cynicism is there in much of contemporary writing in India, the other dominant tone being of rebellion against values. The committed writer is still a major force to reckon with in the political climate of Bengal, but it would appear that there is no half-way house between him and the cynic. One has travelled a long way indeed from the benign comforts of humanism offered by Rabindranath and one does not know if cerebration in creative literature may yet find a home for the bedevilled writer.

IV

In Orissa, fiction begins, turly speaking, with Fakirmohan Senapati (1843-1918), and his story "Rebati" is acknowledged as the first short story, leaving aside folk-tales, in Oriya literature. He was also the first writer who took literature beyond the confines of gentility and decency in feudal terms, which included indecencies sanctified in royal boudoirs and erotic pleasure-groves of Radha and Krishna. By the time he arrived on the scene, the emerging socio-political situation conditioned by British overlords and British ideas had begun to weaken the hold of feudalism in the minds of men. But literature was held to be inviolable in

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its defined area, till Fakirmohan laid claim, with a comic grin, to other ideas on the subject. To start with, his language. It was the spoken language of the common man, and not the sanskritized Oriya of pundits. Next, his social sympathies. The feudal potentates like the village money-lender and the Zemindar, as also the petty anglicized snobs with their laughable but cruel ways were treated to the barbs of Fakirmohan with telling efficacy. At the same time the simple poor looked foolish and dearly beloved by the gods. This had not happened before. Finally, his raw rustic humour served with gusto, which has not been equalled ever since and makes one feel poorly with his intellectual ennui. It is unfortunate that after Fakirmohan there was no going forward for quite sometime in style, tone, and content. The comfortable illusion in some of his works that the wicked must also come to grief, the simplistic contrast between good and bad, and the indisciplined flow of words going much beyond the focal point of revelation were certain defects in this great writer, which were not seized upon by later writers for carrying out further experiments. However, one must mention the great efforts made by subsequent writers to clothe the individual man in social and political attitudes, of which the most important feature was the yearning of the Oriya community for a separate identity. This might pass for a certain broadening of the horizons, and a break with the past. Was there a romantic revival of Oriya fiction in the wake of Sarat Chandra and others in neighbouring Bengal? The attempts made by a few writers, including Ananda Shankar Ray, to form a literary group known as "Sabuja Sahitya Samiti", which was committed to objectives avowedly green and romantic were no doubt prompted by Bengali literature of the day. But their impact on Oriya literature, and fiction in particular, was limited. Next we come to Kalindi Charan Panigrahi (1901) who belonged nominally to the Sabuja group, but was essentially different. For he was more a humanist than a romantic. His novel "Matira Manisha" considered to be one of the modern Indian classics, helps us to this conclusion. Here the idealism of the elder brother appears to be a lovable piece of obstinacy, the weaknesses of the younger brother evoke sympathy, and the women with their jealousies, affections and loyalties are exposed in sweet ordinariness. A general appreciation of the human failings, and compassion extending to dumb animals, as in his short story "Mansara Bilap" characterize the humanism of Kalindi Charan, even as the moral values are not trifled with. Kalindi Charan who is now an octogenarian is the gentle father-image of modern Oriya fiction and reminds one of the liberal graces that are no more.

The pace is quickened when we move towards the mid forties and fifties past Independence. The passage from Kalindi Charan till the present day is crowded by writers of worth and eminence, and in having to choose only six of them for the compilation, it is necessary to refer at some

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length to the impressive contribution made by others to Oriya fiction. Kahnu Charan Mohanty, elder brother of the Jnanpith Award winner Gopinath Mohanty, was the first writer, who with his prolific output and respect for middle-class sentiments in the manner of Sarat Chandra made the reading of fiction a respectable occupation in the homes of the Oriya intelligentsia. He was also one who for the first time gave due prominence to workings of the mind, even though he fought shy of dark corners and did not presume to be psycho-analytical. Nityananda Mahapatra, a noted politician who has written many stories and novels on the social situation broke new ground with his fiction on human relations written in his younger days, notably "Jianta Manisha". No other writer had so far given credence to physical appetites in the complex of human motivations with such poetic fervour. He made sex respectable, before it was taken over by sad intellectualism, a guide to bitterness. For bitterness we come to Rajkishore Patnaik. But regardless of cynicism he did indeed give the readers an entirely new and refreshing experience, particularly in his accountal of love between the sexes in the middle-class society. His novel "Sindura Gara" relating to the loves and yearnings of a married woman, who must have all this and the husband too, denotes a large-sized step forward in realism and can well be considered to be a path-finder. Rajkishore Ray is a veteran story-teller who popularized the short story at a time when social-cum-romantic novels were the rage. Inspite of a certain affectation in style he scored with the picturesqueness of his expressions and the breadth of social sympathies. Surendra Mohanty marks a significant step forward in the writing of fiction in Oriya with his intellectualism combined with a grand manner of expression. His genius is best reflected in historical fiction, and he will be long remembered for having revived the past glories of the Oriya community in the minds of the present generation in such vivid and beautiful colours. Mohapatra Nilamani Sahu is a class apart as a story-teller, for he does not seem to have taken the cue from anyone, does hardly believe in economy of expression as a necessary requirement in short fiction, and allows his ebullient personality to romp through the pages of his fiction like nobody's business. Yet, he is a highly successful writer who charms the reader not only by his sparkling wit and humour but basically by his sincerity, lack of affectation and a measure of empathy with his fellow human beings which is rare among the contemporary writers. Akhil Mohan Patnaik writes with a high degree of social awareness and has helped to demolish quite a few holy cows in the semi-urban milieu of Orissa. Of later writers, Santanu Kumar Acharya shows a remarkable flair for the dramatic and has taken realism some way forward by the colloquialism of his expressions as also by not avoiding the ugly and the obscene in depicting social realities. Among the present-day writers Bibhuti Patnaik commands the most extensive readership by the elegance of his style and

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pseudo-romantic perceptions while Rabi Patnaik, Chandrasekhar Rath, Jagdish Mohanty, Yasodhara Misra and Ramchandra Behera show great promise at the cerebral level of interpreting the human condition. And now to turn to the writers selected for the compilation.

Gopinath Mohanty (1914) is a name to conjure with in modern Oriya fiction. His impact is massive and breath-taking. First and foremost, the delights of his language. No other writer since Fakirmohan has taken language to such sensuous levels, integral to the Oriya myth and idiom, so as to communicate ideas by the intimacies of feeling. In the process, he has filled the pages of Oriya literature with many unfamiliar and musical words of great power and passion, derived as it were from the native earth and her bounties. Then we come to his prestige characters, larger than life, who persuade us to believe that man can transcend himself, after all. He is the alter-ego of our modernism, dearest to our limitations and hidden spiritual yearnings. But above all, he will be remembered as the first Oriya writer who could write in such vivid and vibrant detail and in a tone of abundant warmth, about the forgotten aborigines in the jungles of Orissa, who form a significant proportion of the state's population. "Ants" is a delectable chip that can perhaps provide a glimpse of his achievements in this area. The locale is the border between Orissa and Andhra Pradesh and the question is of smuggling rice across the border which the hero of an official has been asked to check in the interests of the state and in obedience to the law. But what the offiicial sees in the eyes of these ants of smugglers, the poorest of the poor, takes him to perceptions, well past the timidities of time, place and circumstance, and the commentary on a socio-political situation merges into the universal. From the ancient jungles of Orissa I move for my second story to the civilized coastal belt. The writer Sachi Rautroy (1916) is known primarily as a poet of great distinction, who helped Oriya poetry to come of age. His prose output is rather limited, but the fiction-writers owe him a debt of gratitude for his short stories which gave an impetus to realism, by his no-nonsense description of men and events and provided a certain skill in organization and irony for the benefit of his successors. In "Flowers are not for burning" there is no attempt to spare the reader from the gory details of burning a young female body, a body supposed to have been fouled by illicit love and an aborted foetus, and hence denied the benefit of whatever beauty could be offered by rituals. But how does Jagu Tiadi, the malodorous functionary, who burns them all with glee, tear the nose-ring, —which belongs to him by the ethics of the burning ghat—from a face which is like no other? The story is a telling commentary on the social system that goads the young and innocent to such ignominious ends, and has not vanished entirely in rural India. The next story is by Kishori Charan Das, editor of this compilation. He is considered to have given a new dimension to the psycho-

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analytical approach in modern Oriya fiction. His stories are generally microcosmic working on the convolutions of the human mind, in situations leading to revelations which could be for the hero "the moment of truth", though such truths are, more often than not, tentative and ambiguous, thanks to his penchant for irony. But it so happens that his stories which have been popularized and published in English and other Indian languages are socio-centric, carrying a deliberate note of sarcasm, no kin to irony, and created in interludes of intense social awareness. I have therefore chosen, for a change, a story which does not really have a social focus and relates to a predicament of the universal man. Is every man condemned to be an island? The story seeks to expose the horror in a revealing flash, in the life-situation of an average person who loves the daughter of his friend no less—so he thinks—than his own son. In a sense the experience, despite the psycho-analytical mode, relates to yearnings of a rare kind, which could perhaps be termed as spiritual. The next story is by Manoj Das, the most well-known among the contemporary writers outside Orissa, who writes both in English and Oriya with equal felicity. A consummate artist, he writes of human frailties with the gentlest of irony and great compassion, almost in the manner of an indulgent brother. Even when he sets about to mock the tinpots and snobs, it would appear that he asks you to forgive them, for they know not what they are doing. In other words, he loves mankind a little too much, which places him rather outside the conventions of "modernism", not unlike the elder writer Gopinath Mohanty. This is the story of a ghost. But what a lovable ghost! And who, alas is no more!! Incidentally, it introduces the reader to the folk-culture in a lesser-known segment of the Orissa coastline in the days of early British settlement. Of the later writers, Krushna Prasad Mishra stands out in point of sheer craftsmanship. He also brings to bear on his stories philosophical insights, which do not intrude on the narrative and carry an admirable mix of the solemn and the beautiful. Here is, however, a story in which he has chosen to relax, and writes in a lighter vein, bordering on the picaresque, on a commonplace situation in a middle-class Indian family, where the parents are expected to be sexless in the eyes of their grown-up children, or that is atleast the myth, which must never be exploded. The last story is by Chaudhury Hemakanta Misra, a writer who sells humour, in refreshing contrast to the "angst" that characterizes much of modern writing today. His humour is, however, of the kind that veils sarcasm, and can indeed be devastating if you could see through the play of words and images. He is also a master of the unvarnished tale, dealing with real men and events that do not have to be arranged and annotated upon by the outsider of a writer. The story "Sabara" is one such piece, concerning a folk—entertainer in the countryside of Orissa—a type hardly seen these days—who does not stop at amusing you, and can indeed evoke pity

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for a human condition which is not too edifying, thanks to or inspite of the civilizing forces of society. In concluding the write-up on contemporary short fiction in Orissa one is tempted to ask if it is any different, apart from numbers, from that in neighbouring Bengal. Apparently, there is little difference in the non-heroic stance, but is the other, deriving from anger at the social level, equally evident? Perhaps one should not expect parity in this regard, Orissa being a state which is least urbanized and where the polarization between haves and have-nots is not so acute as in the industrialized north. And could it not also be due in some measure to the benign presence of Lord Jagannath ? One has to wait for an answer till Orissa too catches up with the dubious blessings of an industrial society, and it seems she is going to make it soon.

V

Finally I must thank the Indian Council for Cultural Relations for having given me the opportunity of presenting, inspite of my limitations, a glimpse of the rich literary heritage of the eastern region of which I too happen to be a beneficiary. I have considered this assignment as a labour of love and would be happy if it helps in some measure towards a greater awareness in the region of the respective literatures and promotes a sustained study of the emerging trends for mutual benefit as also in the larger interests of Indian literature striving to be one in many languages.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to a few young friends but for whose help in organizing some of the translations and providing valuable information of various kinds it would not have been possible for me to complete the work with satisfaction. Sarvashree Durgadas Mukhopadhyaya, a writer and promoter of performing arts, Sm. Asha Ganguly, writer and widow of late Sri Narayan Gangopadhyaya, Balakrishna Panda, Assistant Editor in the National Book Trust of India and Dr Indira (Mamoni) Goswami are the chief among them, besides many others including Sarvshree S.K. Nag, Gopinath Sharma and Km. Sushila Krishnamurthy who have helped me ungrudgingly in typing, correspondence and other ancillary work. Jai Hind. □

Kishori Charan Das

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Compassion

Syed Abdul Malik

PERHAPS because of living in the same locality for a long time and being almost equal in age, I had developed a lasting friendship with Vivekananda. Of course, we had differences too. For example, he loved to talk and when he found someone to listen to him, he talked incessantly, even forgetting his meals. But I talk less, much less. That apart, I have had very little opportunity to spend time in story-telling like Vivekananda. My interests are confined to my children at home.

Captain Vivekananda's house was usually quiet. He had two children and the boy was away in the Air Force. At home there were only Captain Vivekananda and his daughter Savita. She too remained busy with her books and magazines, and played on violin occasionally.

I have eight children. A small nephew was also staying with me then. Moreover, the chowkidar of my hospital and his wife were staying near my quarters. As a result, though I prefer silence, my house was always noisy.

The compound of my veterinary hospital was quite big, but the cases

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expecting the arival of some person in response to his letter? Or did he station himself there, to avoid embarrassment? Was he trying to prevent the matter being known to other residents of the building?

I heaved a sigh of relief as I reached the main thoroughfare, on my return journey. But the thought of Basu Haldar continued to plague my mind. Why did the man deny his identity, if he was Basu Haldar? He was definitely scared. I thanked him for his cowardly action, for that had saved me from further sufferings. I was terribly frightened myself, but he did not know it. In most situations like this, I was normally the victim, taking the punishment on my own self. Once in my life I wanted to reverse my role, and it wasn't that easy. But it was not a case of failure either,—was it? □

Translated from Bengali by Sadananda Mukherjee

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Ants

Gopinath Mohanty

SLOWLY they moved up, the two tired feet, one after the other. The muscles of the leg tore apart, something hammered inside the chest furiously. Sweat-drops hung from the rim of the hat as raindrops from the eaves. The shorts and the shirt were dripping wet and yet the body moved, as if leaning on the wind. Presently it was the top of the hill. Ramesh paused.

Far far below, the forest of tall trees looked dense-dark. The forest seemed to climb down the stairs of the valley to the nether region! But up there, the bald floor of the hill glittered in the sun, grass-rimmed, with the blue sky all around.

It was no joke climbing hills, Ramesh told himself. But how could a young officer say that to the older people accompanying him! So he brushed away his pain, almost by an act of will, and with teeth pressed against the lower lip joked to them, 'What! Tired out with this much only!' And then his lean wiry figure scuttled across pointed, rough stones.

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His chaprasi Binu came up, sighing like an engine; his huge turban slowly rising like an earth-coloured mushroom. Dark and stockily built, gold ring in nose and ears, a flask and a gun slung round the neck: that was Binu. He came up and stood behind Ramesh as a signboard.

Waves of a choral song's refrain came up from down below: *balle, balle.* One, then a second, then another. Eight figures slowly emerged from behind the tall grass. Kondhs in loin-clothes, with baskets carried at the two ends of poles balanced on the shoulder. The song ended. Binu shouted, 'Lazy bones, how-so-much you chide them they will always trail behind.' 'We have become rather old', somebody retorted; and then they broke into peals of laughter and sat a little apart lighting their home-made cigars.

Binu served tea from the flask. And sipping tea under that *amla* tree Ramesh asked, 'Did you come this way before, Binu?'

'Yes, sir, last time two years ago; many times before that.'

'Did any other officer walk up this way?'

'So many, sir. This is after all on the road to the market.'

Ramesh felt somewhat depressed. Ever since childhood his greatest passion and pleasure lay in a feeling of superiority, of being ahead of all. That was indeed a long and chequered story of success! That insignificant, rustic poor boy from a village in North Balasore gradually growing up to his present status; from the school to the college, friends losing out in life's cruel race, falling behind, seen no more; scholarships, medals, prizes, memories of success. Then the job, unknown people coming to be introduced, the chaprasi's salute, the supplication of the Insurance Agent and the inevitable marriage proposals. The world cared for him, saluted him. Those early successes in life's struggles, self-importance gradually maturing into self-confidence, making him feel he was somebody. Those innumerable others around him were of no significance except as providing a backdrop for his glowing self.

But that uneasy persistent feeling at every step! People had been before him, there were footprints ahead on the road and in comparison he was so small. At least while climbing the hill he could work himself up to some happiness, for was he not the first man from civilization walking up that way? But now even that imagined pleasure was slipping away. And Binu was describing vividly the Burra Sahib's five-day camp on this hill top, the hunting, the merrymaking and the dances that had transformed it to a city!

That was merely another time. Men had come and gone away; only the forest looked dark as ever. Binu reminisced: 'No more the dense forests of those days, wild animals prowling everywhere. The Kondhs have cleaned up everything. Here itself were Kondh villages; when the forests vanished the tigers rampaged in the villages and the villagers had to move away.'

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'These days there are no forests? Then what are these?'

'Yes, the chopped-off trees also grow again and make a forest. But those forests!'

Ramesh thought of the endless stream of men roaming the forest; penetrating, recoiling and coming back again, the thin hill-stream of their happiness and pain that never died and even now murmured as it rushed down the pebble-bed.

He felt a sudden burst of anguish that dulled his acute awareness of separate self and merged it into that eternal stream.

A thin line of ants had already formed around the broken bits of biscuits. Ramesh was startled and smiled to himself: 'Here too the ants!' They reminded him of the hidden subterranean roots of his visit to the hills.

He asked Binu, 'You think we can catch the rice-smugglers?' 'Most certainly, sir. Whichever way it goes the smuggled rice has to appear in Kaspawalsa market. It is only 10 a.m. now and climbing down that valley we will be at the market before two. And then, where can they escape? We will catch them all.' 'Fine, let us then move without any more delay.'

Binu was vexed at the prospect of no rest, even up here. And he shouted at the Kondhs, directing them to move. The Kondhs also muttered their dissatisfaction. No rest, only run and run fast. In their strange primitive language they showered abuse on Binu and his fore-fathers. These fellows, they thought, knew only how to order; bring water, fetch fuel-wood, carry luggages. And they learnt only a few words of command. No harm abusing them soundly! And the Kondhs talked among themselves—what fools these fellows must be trying to catch people for selling rice across a border! Hunger was universal and whoever wanted rice had a right to purchase it wherever he could. Whatever could be the crime in that? And who after all produced the rice? Or could it be that these people had separate laws of justice; laws under which it was a crime to distil liquor, to chop off forest trees, to purchase rice, to sit down when tired after a long day's trek carrying heavy luggages? But there was no time to talk further. The chaprasi had started abusing, the officer had started walking fast. The Kondhs got up. All their complaints joined up to a song with a refrain.

The dense forest lay ahead. Down the valley the road opened up as a tunnel. Their song in chorus pleased Ramesh. How soothing it sounded! What did it mean? May be some community legend.

'Binu', Ramesh roared.

Binu ran up to him full of bitterness and abuse inside. At fifty-five, sans six teeth, the bald patch ever growing on the head, the body wanted leisurely pace, quiet and ease. But this young officer would hurry up everybody, run as mad himself and drive others mad. Binu had enough

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to live on and could easily do without the job. But minus the power it gave him, would he not be shorn of his magic, reduced to only another person among those numerous insignificant others on whom he had fed all his life? And it was this fear of losing the powers of the mysterious magic, the terrible charm, that drove Binu up the hill.

'Binu, how nicely these folks sing.' Ramesh said.

'Very nice indeed, sir.'

'But what does it mean?'

Tossing his *pugree* from side to side and giving another twist to the betel inside his mouth Binu explained as a wise man, 'Of course, it is that song of the Chaitra festival.'

'But what does it mean?'

'That same old story of Dhangdas and Dhangdis* and their love for each other.'

'Do they always sing this song?'

'Always, sir!'

'But does *balle* mean jasmine?'

'You have got it right, sir. At this rate, you will be a master of their language in no time.'

Ramesh was pleased with this answer and asked, 'Do they sing songs even in ripe old age?' 'In this country of ours none ever grows old, sir.' Ramesh took mental note. *Balle* is jasmine and the Kondhs only sing of love.

Binu felt happy at having befooled Ramesh.

And the Kondh labourers continued their trek singing their tale of woe, the unending story of misfortunes; all the while heaping abuses on the officer and his wretched *chaprasi*. Groups of Kondhs met them along the road, laughed, exchanged jokes, joined the music and partook of the same cruel destiny of pain. They could so easily share the mocking spirit of the songs! When there was a lull in the singing Binu shouted at them and asked them to continue. 'None grows old in our country': Binu's own words took a new shape and meaning for himself. He thought of his youngest wife, his third whom he had snatched away from many eager hopes, by paying extra 'bride-price' to her parents. In this land of forests superiority consisted in snatching away things and in that man excelled animals at times. But Binu's trickery concealed the frustration of a lifetime. He had orchards, lands, houses, cattle—everything but a child of his own. With growing years he felt this vacuum more and more. He remembered his youngest wife and became anxious as to how his two elder wives would be treating her. In this country, if a woman did not feel happy with her husband she just left. Binu started worrying whether his youngest wife was happy with him. And then he remembered that

*Unmarried Adivasi boys and girls respectively

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young chaprasi Bisi, a distant grandson who often came to his house to crack jokes at his grandma.

'Binu.'

'Yes, sir.'

'How is it that this smuggled rice is not detected any earlier? For smuggling to Madras they must be stacking the rice somewhere and the businessmen must be carrying stock from there. But though we have by now trekked four days from Koraput, nowhere we saw any such thing.'

'It could be detected only if it moved in bulk, sir.' Saying this in disgust, Binu remembered how he himself had been able to smuggle out a hundred maunds of rice at exorbitant rates. He believed that in a society which left everybody to fend for himself, pulling others' legs, trying to cheat others and thrive at their expense was only natural and right. Breaking rules for one's own selfish ends and fear lest one is caught were natural corollaries of such a selfish system, he thought. He tried to twist the direction of the conversation.

'Not much rice is being smuggled away by isolated individuals. At the market, sir, you will see only small buyers from the plains down below, with ten kgs., twenty kgs. of purchases. Only a few miles away is the Madras border and there the businessmen would be waiting with bullock carts, hessian bags and pots of money. Then cartloads of rice would move to Vizagapatnam, Parbatipur and other places. Businessmen, after all, know the secrets of the trade, sir.'

Ramesh became serious. 'We have to catch the stock of rice before it reaches the traders.'

His eyes shone with the strange, fierce light of a hunter's eyes. A single theme was haunting him. Why should others steal away our rice? He felt it was an interference in his personal rights that must be resisted.

While speaking of 'our rice', his consciousness pictured one thing only: he was an Oriya, behind him lay the history of Orissa, the story of wars, empires and expansion at the cost of others. From the dust-heap and broken bricks of the past his mind returned to the degeneration of the present and sought to put the blame for this on the neighbouring states.

Fellows have already eaten up this country and made it all hollow. What now again? He asked himself. He remembered the prey down the forest roads. His mind got intoxicated with the prospect of hunting down the rice smugglers. 'If only I catch them', he clenched his teeth.

But he did not know what he would do if he caught them. He hurried down the slope of the hill.

It was late winter and the heat of the walk gave the feeling of spring. Trees were full of foliage and flowers. At the end of the slope was a small village. Mango groves, fields, threshing grounds, rows of houses. Along the road stood a small boy and seeing unknown persons, he cried

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for his mother and ran away. That was only the beginning. The calves tethered on the roadside strained at the ropes and started mooing. The womenfolk withdrew inside and stared with big blank eyes. One by one the villagers came near. Ramesh felt it was a known picture. His feet started dragging. He stood in the shade of a spreading tree and looked back The hill stood behind him as a monstrous ghost of the imagination. Binu was coming down slowly panting and the Kondhs behind him almost running.

'Can we get some drinking water here, Binu?' he asked.

'Of course, sir.' Binu was all attention. He opened the luggage pack and ran into the village with a glass and a *lota*. The Kondhs sat down for a little rest. Ramesh waited. In no time a *charpoy* was produced, somebody stood with a *lota* of hot milk. Another with a bunch of ripe bananas and a mixed drone of Oriya and Telugu entreated him, 'It is already too late, sir, and the sun has climbed almost to the top of the sky. The villagers would feel most unhappy, sir, if you do not pause here for some food and rest.'

Rest! Ramesh laughed to himself. That self-same invitation all along the way. As if walked-in by forests and hills men only wanted to lean on one another. Pause here for a while, stay in our village for the night. Shadows of known trees, the slow, trailing smoke on half-recognized thatched roofs, men and women engaged in the familiar rituals of daily living. Man in forests, on the hills, everywhere the known world of men.

And yet, he had to move. That affectionate welcome of the village left behind would persist as a sweet smell for a while and then drift away in the indifferent wind.

Binu returned with some water. Ramesh drank it off and said, 'Let us now move.' Suddenly an old woman appeared and stood in his way. A smile lighting up her time-worn face, she said, 'At this late hour, my dear son, how can you go without some food? Would your mother have left you like this? Don't you have mothers and sisters in this village?'

Everybody smiled. The old woman was of the Kondh-Dora caste, an admixture of Kondhs and Telugus.

Suddenly Ramesh felt heaps of cool shade piling on his sunburnt eyes. But he said loudly, almost trying to persuade himself, 'No, no, we have to move. There is so much to do.' He dragged himself away. The shadow of that old woman's mother-face remained transfixed in his memory. Like all mothers' eyes, her eyes looked deep inside and an eternal 'alas' floated on her lips. She had no caste, no language. She was mother. The job on hand was forgotten for a while. But it came back again when he saw people on way to the market with headloads of rice.

'Binu, how far is the market now?'

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'Just a little ahead, sir. We have almost reached.'

'Take care, no shouting, no noise any longer.' Binu cautioned the Kondhs not to sing any more and walk silently. It was now a silent, cautious march like hunters in a forest. Deep silence reigned outside but there was so much noise raging inside. Ramesh raced hurriedly in his mind over the projected action. He would not merely stop the smuggling for a day; he would suggest a permanent cure for this evil in his report to the Government. That would bring him commendation, recognition and hasten his pace up the ladder of progress. It was like winning a prize or a special credit in the examination. He felt he richly deserved it. For was he not like Livingstone in Black Africa trying to locate the original source of illegal smuggling across the border? He felt overwhelmed with his own efficient and skilful handling of the matter.

A little ahead, on the roadside, a family was having the day's food in the shade of a tree. A small child, twitching its wiry hands and feet violently, lay on the ground, with its face to the sky. The blue sky was rent by its sharp cry. The shrivelled figure of a young woman in rags, hair all dishevelled, left her leaf-plate of food and without even washing her hands, pulled away the torn rags covering her breasts and hurriedly put them to the child's mouth. The dried-up breasts dangled like rags. With the child clutched in her arms the young mother kept staring at the strangers. As though she was no person, but only some dishevelled hair and two indifferent distant eyes! There was no eagerness for any news, no care for anybody's eminence in those eyes. The world outside hardly existed. Seeming to look out on the world outside it really looked deep down in the flesh, to the dregs of the life-force where ultimate hunger pained, ultimate love covered bird-like offsprings under its protective wings. Three others were also eating rice: an old man, an old woman and the husband of the young woman. Only bones and skin, caves of eyes and masses of dense hair on the head. The eyes sometimes glittered. The little rice shone on the leaf-plates. It was no eating, it was a hungry dog's gobbling-up food, breathlessly. Under the tree rim-broken and decrepit cooking vessels and the improvised fire-place lay gaping at the sky. The entire picture attacked Ramesh with its naked reality.

'Binu, who are these?'

'The Telugus from the valley, sir. So many like them roam the jungles driven by hunger.'

'Where is your home?' Ramesh turned to them. After two more repetitions of the question, the old man replied, without lifting his head from the leaf-plate and looking rather annoyed, 'Simachalam'.

Binu explained to Ramesh that the place was sixty miles away. Ramesh remembered : Once upon a time it was part of Orissa. History stood before him as a huge dark hill, then it grew smaller and smaller

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almost becoming a mound of earth and then, suddenly it sank in the gaping, cold eyes of that young mother who was now feeding and fondling the kid. Ramesh knew in a flash that the place may no longer be in Orissa, but it was there very much a part of the wide world and its people who were condemned to their ancient hunger. 'So many like these are roaming the forests, sir. The bigger fear of hunger has made them fearless of the lesser categories like forests and the wild animals', Binu said.

'Quite so, quite so', the Kondhs echoed. They had drawn nearer and an old Kondh said, 'When hunger or pain attacks, men are all alike. Look! how hungry we have started feeling. Where is the arrangement for food, chaprasi babu?'

Silently Ramesh walked ahead. Suddenly he felt a creeping confusion darkening his objectives. He wanted to do justice, but no longer knew what that word meant. Always he had depended on the short-cuts of established ways and conventional modes, always he had bowed to established laws, written rules and had felt it wrong to look deeper to see what lay behind them. Sometimes his sense of justice and fair play had conflicted with the law but he had persuaded himself that after all duty was always hard and relentless like the churning of a machine. Driven by hunger somebody had stolen something, his pregnant wife had perhaps rolled and cried on the verandah of the *cutchery* with a year-old child in her arms and entreated that there was none else to support them. But nothing had mattered; a thief, after all, had to go to prison. That was law. Somebody else had suffered a year's imprisonment for the theft of a pumpkin because of five earlier convictions. Relentless and cruel were the demands of duty, he concluded; no place for softness there. He resolved afresh; he had to catch the rice-smugglers. The noise of the market now sounded near. The rotten fishy smell of raw-hide was everywhere. Men emerged in groups from behind the forest trees. Some had headloads, others baskets hung from the two ends of poles balanced on the shoulder. Small children peeped out of a few baskets. Bunches of fowl, legs tied together and heads looking down, dangling various other commodities and rice. The prey seemed very near at last. Ramesh felt a sudden thud in his chest. Almost running down the stairs of stones he shouted, 'Binu, now we have had them!'

The market lay before them. Men huddled together, swarming all around like ants. A kaleidoscope of colours, many smells, an orchestration of droning sounds. Raw-hide's offensive smell choked the air; rows of stalls of sold dried fish. Flies buzzed everywhere; so did the men. The smell of illicit liquor came wafting in the breeze from the neighbouring forests.

Lepers and men with 'yaws' disease, like dogs with weeping wounds, patches of raw wound of 'yaws' with small dark insects sitting on them.

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Healthy men and women pushing their way through the miling crowd. That was the market.

Ramesh suddenly noticed a young girl with the colour of champak flower and a well-carved body. One of her cheeks had a patch of 'yaws', the other cheek was looking red but there also 'yaws' had started. Yet she had decorated herself with flowers and moved slowly, a picture of grace, munching something. And she looked from the corners of her eyes which seemed to smile and invite others to play. Ramesh closed his eyes and leaned on a tree in the centre of the market. Waves of noise were breaking on his ears. The mind's eye saw that young girl with 'yaws' on the cheeks and smile in the eyes. The Kondh boys danced on the hilltop.

And then he knew. In the midst of dense forests, on the top of hills man lived. The fire in his fireplace survived the howling wind and the cruel merciless weather.

For man was like Dalua paddy, the more the water, the more the plant grew. 'Yaws' on the cheeks and smile on the leprous face. Straining all the life-force a rose had blossomed even though its petals were crooked and worm-eaten. It may wither and fall. Yet it smiled.

Binu opened the flask and poured out tea. 'Sir', he called. Ramesh opened his eyes. The crowd was growing thicker around him. Binu whispered in his ear, 'Lots of rice is selling, everything can be caught but not right here. There is a strategic point beyond the market, a narrow depressed lane leading to a thatched house. There we can wait. From there it would be almost like shooting a tiger from a *machan*'. Binu smiled.

All of them went there. Ramesh sat on a chair. Binu left, saying, 'Let me now go and give final touches to the operation.'

Ramesh kept sitting. A little further away on an elevation on the hill-slope was a Kondh bustee. *Charpoys* were spread out in the open. Dogs waited near men, wagging their tails. Some kids were beating a huge drum to their heart's content. On a doorstep an old man sat vomiting. And old lady anxiously caressed his back. Must be malarial fever. A goat stood on heaps of broken walls and munched the twigs of some tree. Time flew by as Ramesh kept his eyes fastened on the scene. He wiped the sweat from his body, tried to take out the dust of the market from his nostrils. The day was drawing to a close, shadows lengthened in the late winter sun, and the picture of an ordinary bustee with its simple everyday world lay spread out in that faded background.

Suddenly somebody started weeping. People ran out of all houses and rushed to that house from where the weeping came. In front of the house and at the doorsteps in no time there was a crowd. Scratching their cheeks and beating their chests they all wept bitterly. Gradually it transformed itself into a rhythmic, piteous fury, a chorus of death-music.

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'Alas ! Alas ! He is dead, he is dead.' Binu came back, almost from nowhere. 'I have arranged everything, sir. The paiks were in the market. I have asked them to drive all the smugglers here.'

'What happened there, Binu?'

'Nothing very much, sir. Somebody is dead. Must be of hill-fever. Nothing new in that.' Binu kept standing behind Ramesh. Ramesh kept listening to that weeping. Ever new, ever old. And the wheel turned, life, death, reproduction. Every picture melted and changed. In his mind's eye floated up his village Kantipur in North Balasore. His home, parents, neighbours, known old men, known children and known girls; all the distance from the burning-ghat to the centre of the village, to the place of Chandi. Death, life, regeneration. There too lived men who loved peace and tranquility, who had no quarrel with life and who suffered pain even though doing no harm to others.

The refrain of the chorus of the death-song continued.

So many had gone earlier, so many. In dark nights the villagers light up torches of fire and invoke them, 'come back in darkness, return in light.'

The vast plain of death lay ahead of him. There, language and country did not divide. All were equal and eternal.

Standing behind, Binu too thought of his home, his youngest wife. Would Bisi be coming? Suddenly he slapped his own cheeks. Ramesh looked at him. Binu was rubbing his cheek with his palm. 'This place is full of very big mosquitoes. Their bite is very painful,' he added.

Ramesh was startled. He could see himself lying on bed, shivering. Eyes bloodshot, body dark as a bear. It would start at one hundred and three degrees temperature and make one feel like biting, abusing, running mad.

Vomiting, heat, mounting heat and then?

Birth, death, reproduction, birth, death.

Law does not come to the mind. Birth, death, man. As if he suddenly saw everything with new eyes! men walked, many men, getting lost in the dark. But the stream did not die. It flowed on and on. The market was coming to a close. Men were moving. He felt he knew everybody, all these people, in person. Pressure of wants at home, oppression of life outside. And yet they moved on. Caste and language did not matter. They were men. His villagers, known men. In the unending stream an ant looked up to the other ants, an ineffable smile flowed from its dried-up eyes as it seemed to say : 'We are brothers, we walk on our feet and work with our hands : we belong to the same land, this ancient earth under the sky. Our enemy is common: those who snatch away the little food from our mouths, crush us to death and heap hot ashes and cinders on us.'

The stream of ants flowed on. In the depth of Ramesh's mind the

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unextinguished lamp of smile and fire continued to burn.

Suddenly there was commotion outside. The paiks were coming, followed by men carrying baskets and bags. In a moment Ramesh was transformed into his official self, stood up and accepted the salute of the paiks. Binu rushed forward and said, 'they are being dragged here in groups.'

The paiks said, 'Kindly see, sir, how these fellows were smuggling away rice from this market to the plains below. The baskets and bags have only a top dressing of chillies, turmeric and tobacco, but below these there is rice. They will sell the smuggled rice at exorbitant rates. For a handful of rice they will eat up the flesh or blood of men.'

Ramesh looked again. An army of skeletons stood facing him. Ribs showed as iron shafts of a hoeing machine, skins dangled on the ribs as on a bat's body, the bodies all twisted, bent, only heaps of oil-less hair on the head and tiny flickering eyes. Were they men or the ghosts of men? Entreating in their strange language; now weeping, now pointing to their cave-like bellies and mouths, now dangling their slender, weak, twig-like hands. In the bustee on the other side, the dead body was brought out of the house. Presently men were jostling about, throwing their heads forward and weeping in a chorus, 'Alas! Alas! Who snatched you away? Who ate you up?'

And down there in the narrow lane below the bustee, the living ghosts entreated and prayed, beating their chests and heads : 'Oh God Almighty, Oh father!' The paiks roared, and Binu shouted, 'No, no, that won't do. Open up the bags, show the rice.'

Ramesh closed his eyes, something tottered and crashed inside him. The exhaustion and hunger of the long trek closed in and submerged him. Eyes shut, he could only see the confused, crazy, co-mingling sea of men, 'yaws' on the cheeks, smile on the face, shrivelled skin on the body and glitter in the eyes. Everything was mixed up, inseparable; the piteous wailings for the dead, the heart-rending cry of deprivation and poverty, the fire and storm raging in the caves below the eyes. He opened his eyes and looked; the cry was continuing. 'Have pity, sir, have mercy Almighty, see our condition.' Before him stood a tall skeleton of a man, almost made of dried palm-leaf. Two long hands went up, joined in salutation and then slowly drooped down. They could crumble to pieces anytime! An empty, hoarse voice entreated, prayed, 'Have pity, my father.' What was the language? Ramesh did not know. But the meaning went in Prostrate on the ground and stretched right up to his feet that shadowy figure raised its head and the eyes looked Ramesh straight in the face. That look took the shape of the look of some known person, known to Ramesh, known to all. It went out of every person when hunger struck and looked quizzically as if from a mirror. Ramesh felt he knew all these people intimately, like his villagers. No longer he

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was seeing their shapes and forms: the intimacy of their inner self overpowered him. That shape just before him was his long-dead 'Sapana' uncle, the same dishevelled hair, the mad man's unshaven face, those gaping pits on the thresholds of the bones. Only he looked more tired, more hungry, more frightened by the terrible vision of death. That other old man, moustached, all bent and crooked, was none other than the hapless blacksmith of Kantipur village!

And those urchins with only skin and bone. Were they not his village boys who had entered his garden and ate up all the raw guavas? And those women looking like tattered, frail, leaking boats? Were they not his village womenfolk rushing to collect fallen dry leaves for fuel early in the morning? Ramesh tried to hide his eyes, hanging down his head. Only his brief murmuring words could be heard, 'Go, go away.'

Binu could hardly believe what this officer was saying. Did he seriously mean it? Anxiously he entreated, 'Sir, but sir.' But Ramesh only repeated, 'Leave them. It is getting late.'

'Go away, go.'

Binu groped in his memory for the image of authority. Certainly it was not like this : this young boy, soft and kind-hearted, hardly knew the world. Moustaches just sprouting, slim, with a delicate voice. Hardly an officer, he concluded. Real authority was like tiger. Binu had seen many down the years. In his twisted lips there was a strange expression. Partly in smile, partly in ridicule.

Ramesh kept standing. Before his consciousness there was no more any history. Time had ended. There was no Kapilendradev, no Purushottam, no Konarak. There was no special distinctive image of the men who form the backbone of a country or a nation. History was devoid of sense, meaning. There was nothing but ants, ants; everywhere, hungry ants carrying mouthfuls of food to live, to survive and the stream of ants converging on ant-heaps for a new lease of precarious life. The ant wanted to live. Ramesh felt a cold shudder. The brief sunshine of late winter had faded. All around a thin layer of blue haze was spreading. It was evening. He felt the cold of *Magh* month inside. □

Translated from Oriya by Sitakant Mohapatra

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Flowers are not for Burning

Sachi Rautroy

JAGU TIADI, of Podabasanta, a Brahmins' colony, leads the 'Kirtan' party of the village, and takes pleasure in playing, in season and out of season, on the drum which is a familiar accompaniment of that religious chorus. He prefers smoking Ganja (hemp) as a stimulant of hallowed tradition, and follows the trade of cremating dead bodies. As an efficient undertaker who consigns corpses to ashes without a twinge of conscience, Jagu is well-known in the entire area.

If a piping sound comes out of the dead body placed on the burning pyre or if the legs of the corpse become stiff and are thrown upward on account of the blazing heat or if fluids ooze out of the intestines of the corpse and threaten to extinguish the pyre, or if things take any awkward turn, all his comrades-at-cremation look up to Jagu for help and advice.

At such times, Jagu, slightly overpowered by a strong dose of Ganja, is perhaps found sitting at a little distance somewhere on the cremation ground, dozing in the merry swaying manner. On being suddenly called

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to the rescue of his colleagues, he gets up with a start, hastens to the pyre, pulls out a bamboo pole three cubits long and administers to the dead body a couple or a quarter dozen of smart thrashings while shouting the phrase, "A good beating for the naughty ghost". In consequence of the severe assaults committed on the corpse, either its skull breaks to pieces, or its brain comes out with a mass of damp fluid that extinguishes the fire from a portion of the pyre. The wayward legs of the corpse give way at the knee and bend down in a dangling fashion in the cleft of the stack of the half-burnt firewood. On top of it all, the belly is burst asunder and the flaming tongue of the fire spreads on fast to the region of the intestines, consuming easily all flesh, sinews, nerves and veins. And lo, the corpse is then reduced to ashes in the twinkling of an eye!

Imagine a damp ground littered with heaps of ashes, consecrated winnow-fans, broom-sticks, cracked earthern bowls, broken earthen jars, remnants of torn rags, severed nails of human fingers, and dismembered hair of the head, pieces of human bones, skulls and skeletons, and dirty odds and ends, and you have before you the typical cremation ground in the countryside where dead Hindus are consigned to fire.

Pleased with his own feats in the art of cremation Jagu leaves the burning ghat. He goes to the village tank, and sits on its bank in a posture of calm and complacence. Then he sets himself to the task of massaging his body with oil as a preparation for the purifying ablution. He strikes his thigh with the palm of his right hand, and utters, 'Let God be thanked that the cremation has passed off smoothly through his mercy.'

When epidemics like cholera or small pox break out in the villages nearby, and the dead bodies of the unfortunate victims pile up in every house, Jagu is in great demand. All the bereaved families flock to his place and beg him for help. Some of them approach him with tears in their eyes, some hold out temptations of money, and some try to win him over with the best of cajolery coupled with touching humility. Jagu listens to all the supplicants with deep, studied gravity. But he keeps mum in a non-committal manner.

"Look here my good brother, a corpse had been lying in my house since yesternight. It has begun to rot and stink. For God's sake, do please help your poor bereaved neighbour."

Before one finishes his sad story, another comes forward and puts in pleading gestures, "The dead body of the bride has been lying decomposed in a corner of the house for the last two days. Be good enough to help me out of this predicament." Such are the specimens of numerous reports of bereavement and requests for necessary help, which Jagu receives when epidemics ravage the village.

But no appeal, however moving it may be, weighs with Jagu where his fees are concerned. If a lump of opium, an appreciable quantity of

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Ganja and 25 naye paise are not given in advance, he would not budge an inch. Besides these, the first meal after fasting occasioned by death in the family, the new dress provided on the tenth day to those closely associated with the act of cremation, and invitation to dinners given to friends and relatives at the end of the funeral rites are some of the additional benefits he would expect.

When a wife predeceases her husband, the act of her cremation is a substantially profitable deal for Jagu. If she comes of a well-to-do family, her golden ear-rings and noserings and the golden jasmine buds worn on her head are Jagu's dues. But if she belongs to a poor family the silver rings adoring her toes fall to Jagu's share. Before consigning the dead body of a woman to the burning pyre, Jagu carefully examines her person for any ornaments that might have been left over. If there be any, he removes it and appropriates it to himself. When the act of removal proves to be a tough job, Jagu gets annoyed and with clenched teeth, pulls the ornaments violently out of the nose or the ears, as the case may be. This results in the tearing off of the nose and the ears of the corpse and the smearing of its face with bluish blood that comes out of those injured parts.

If the corpse is that of a pregnant woman, Jagu would not carry the bier unless he is paid in advance a silver coin of the highest denomination. When he is asked to reduce his fees, he threatens to move heaven and earth to see that the corpse rots in the house leading to excommunication of the bereaved family, or incites his comrades-at-cremation to withhold co-operation.

On receiving a rupee as part-payment of his fees, Jagu lifts the bier and marches smartly in the village streets carrying the weight of the departed woman, stepping to the tune of the funeral drum, and shouting the mournful slogan, "Ram Nam Satya Hai". The white sacred thread worn across his black marble-like body could then be seen shining in the light with an uncanny glow.

The whole village resounds with the loud echoes of his solemn slogan. The women-folk rush out of the houses and crowd in the streets. But the children feel scared and hide themselves in secluded corners of their respective homes. In the cremation ground the washerman tears open the stomach of the corpse with a dragon-pin and brings the embryo out of the womb. After this is done, Jagu digs two trenches, one close to the other and lays flat the corpse of the mother and the dead embryo side by side. Sometimes he puts both on the pyre and sets fire to it. If the pyre does not provide space for two, Jagu thrusts a huge poker into the embryo serveral times, and then rolling up the completely-minced embryo into a ball, throws it into the burning pyre.

In this way Jagu supplements the annual yield of his ancestral lands by an additional income earned through the business of burning dead

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bodies, and maintains himself and his family, meeting the multifarious demands of existence.

No one ventures to criticize Jagu, openly, for such subsidiary occupation. In the village there is no experienced Brahmin comrade-at-cremation other than Jagu. If one suggests a reduction in Jagu's fees, Jagu stoutly defends the rates prescribed by him with arguments to the effect that the remuneration paid to him is very low in relation to the arduous nature of the job. He supports his arguments by instances of heroic acts of cremation done by him in the past and asserts that in the art of cremation there is none second to him in the whole world.

A few of the innumerable tales of cremation illustrating Jagu's heroic feats and which are very skilfully recounted by him may be of interest to the reader. Once Jagu could successfully consign the corpse of the wife of Narasingha Misra to fire at a time when it was raining cats and dogs. What was worse, while returning from the cremation grounds on that occasion he encountered a live ghost in the form of a huge headless human body just at the last limits of the Satgachia mango tope, a grove so called because of its formation by a clump of seven trees. Again, one winter night while cremating the corpse of Natha Brahma who had died of dropsy, about two pitchers of acidic fluids streamed out of the stomach of the deceased and nearly extinguished the flaming fire of the pyre. But Jagu, not to be put out by such an untoward event, could with great presence of mind and resourcefulness burn that impregnable corpse to ashes, in the end.

Any customer speaking to Jagu Tiadi for a while cannot avoid listening to his long experience and extraordinary skill in cremating dead bodies.

Every evening in the *Bhagabat-ghar*, the religion-cum-recreation club of the village, Jagu Tiadi narrates to his friends, at least once, some tale of his adventure in the burning ghat. In the evenings rendered dull and unpleasant by murky weather all the members sit closely round Jagu Tiadi expecting to hear such stories from him. After a deep puff at his pipe of Ganja, Jagu coughs to clear his throat, and the listeners infer that the expected tale will follow. Jagu then narrates with the skill of a master story-teller how once, while returning from the burning ghat after cremating a pregnant woman, he saw a witch sitting on the horned branch of a mango tree by the side of the village stream 'Muktajhar' and giving her baby the customary vapour-bath of the lying-in-room. The listeners sit huddled in awe and wonder drawing closer to the wall.

In this way Jagu got along in life in that small colony of the Brahmins. Once it was an autumn night. Clouds lay thick like blankets on the sky and had made the weather sultry since evening. Jagu Tiadi with paintings of liquid lime on both the temples of his eyes as a cure for headache and covering his head with a muffler, sat on the cemented

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platform erected in the middle of the main street of the village, and was busy listening to the recital from the scripture called 'Harivansha'. All of a sudden the whole colony seemed to ring with a loud outburst of weeping. Someone who was returning home after purchasing his daily need of betel-nuts and gum-powder from the neighbourhood store announced that the daughter-in-law of the old mother Jatia had died suddenly. In no time the news spread in the entire village. Jagu Tiadi was not entirely sorry to hear the news that held out to him the prospect of some fair income.

People came out with varying reports about the cause of death. The women-folk started whispering to one another insinuating adultery. One said that the woman who had just passed away had taken some drugs believed to cause abortion and the poisonous thing resulted in haemorrhage and death.

Jagu Tiadi began to lose interest in the reports. He realized that he could not hope for handsome earnings without facing the prospect of excommunication.

The old mother of Jatia lived only with her daughter-in-law. Her son had gone to Calcutta a month after his marriage with the hope of securing suitable employment and sufficient income to liquidate his debt. Nothing had been heard of him for the last three years. At first he used to write to his people at times. But for the last one year he had stopped all correspondence without any possible reason. The Brahmin cooks returning to their native place from Calcutta came with the report that Jatia lived in Matiaburuja of Calcutta, in illegal relationship with a woman. The old mother had only the daughter-in-law left with her. But now she too had gone for ever. And to add insult to the injury, she had left a permanent slur on the family. Resting her head on her palm, the old woman kept on sitting on the floor in stunned silence, and it seemed the will to survive had been completely drained out of her.

There would have been no end to her misery that day, if it were not for some of the elders of the village who intervened in the matter and brought the situation under control. Though they rebuked Jatia's mother severely for not keeping her daughter-in-law under control, they decided that the dead body should be disposed of at all costs, for after all they had failed in their duty to admonish the erring girl in proper time, and death had now put her beyond all the pin-pricks of the world. If in the alternative, information would be lodged at the police station at Chhatia by the village Chowkidar, the village would be scandalized for all times to come. It should not be forgotten that such a course of action would lower the prestige of each family and throw the character of all the women-folk of the village open to question.

Jatia's mother acknowledged to each one of them, in all humility and bowed head, the sympathies offered to her in her extraordinary distress.

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Three or four stalwart young volunteers of the village came forward to carry the corpse to the cremation ground. Ropes of straw were prepared, the bier was arranged, and winnow-fans, broom-sticks, logs of drywood, and earthen jars and pots were kept ready on the floor. They wrapped up the corpse from top to toe with a cloth and bound it securely on the bier. Only a veteran comrade-at-cremation was wanting to complete the required preparation. Every minute was precious. The dead body was to be burnt to ashes within half an hour, as there was likelihood of common danger in case of delay. If the police got any scent of the matter, most of the villagers would be arrested and taken to the police station. Mischief-mongers were not rare in the village.

The elders and betters were unanimous in that Jagu Tiadi must be called upon to help them. Without his assistance and co-operation such a serious business could not be executed smoothly.

A messenger was deputed to Jagu, but the latter bluntly refused to have anything to do with the affair. He blurted out, 'I will not even touch the corpse of that adulteress, not to speak of carrying her dead body to the cremation ground.'

All tried their utmost to persuade him but Jagu stuck to his principles in a seemingly irrevocable manner. After some more coaxing and cajoling, they obtained his consent with the definite string that he would not be a party to that sinful transaction without receiving in advance a fee of rupees five. All the hoarded treasures buried by Jatia's mother in a secret corner of her house were unearthed, but were found to be grossly inadequate for the necessary funeral expenses. So Jagu's demand appeared to be the last straw on the camel's back. After considerable persuasion it was settled that the small golden nose-ring worn by the deceased woman would go to Jagu as his fees. Pleased at the bargain, Jagu Tiadi shouted loudly the customary funeral slogan 'Ram Nam Satya Hai'.

The formal act of giving farewell to the departed soul with necessary fare for its heavenward journey was solemnized. Jagu then dug a huge trench and laid the corpse flat on the pyre arranged over the trench. This done, he removed the veil from the face of the deceased woman.

The golden ring adorning the nose of the dead feminine being appeared to be about a quarter-tola in weight. It shone in a rare twinkle in the glimmering light of the hurricane lamp. The moon had also come out of the dispersing clouds and spread a silver haze on the pale face of the dead woman.

"Hurry up good brother! Let us finish it all as quickly as possible. All our efforts will go in smoke, if the police catch us red-handed." His comrade-at-cremation kept on urging Jagu with these words.

Jagu stretched his hand to pull out the golden nose-ring. But he suddenly noticed that the pale face of the dead woman looked like a

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faded lily in the moonlight. In the background of that lost splendour was the luxuriantly black and curling hair of her head. It was almost an exact replica of the moon seeking for a place in the mass of dense dark clouds in the sky overhead.

Jagu held back his hand spread out for pulling the nose-ring. Then he kept on looking at the pale moon of the sky.

Jagu had cremated the dead bodies of many departed souls in that very cremation ground. But never before had he felt the fury of such conflicting emotions. To pull out the nose-ring and disfigure that lovely face seemed to him an act of sacrilege, for the golden nose-ring seemed to set off brilliantly the beauty of the Bride of Death herself.

It suddenly flashed across his mind that after a few months she would have stepped into the glorious stage of womanhood—the stage of being a mother. She would have moved on from there to other important roles. But alas! nothing, nothing came her way! Who was the wretch responsible for this tragic waste?

Jagu Tiadi paused for long over the face of the dead woman, lost in thought. Forlorn was her life indeed. Not only did she look forlorn now in death, she appeared to have led a lonely life all along in her earthly career. Probably she got fed up with her lonely and crippled existence and wanted to taste the joys of living for a change, for which she was now a corpse at the point of cremation. Jagu discovered acute and unrelieved hunger in the contours of that pale face.

His colleagues at the cremation ground got annoyed with Jagu for the delay. They threatened that they would leave the place if he delayed further. Who would be answerable for the lapse if the police came? If Jagu was not going to remove the golden ring from the corpse by way of receiving his fees, they would consign the dead body to fire. He seemed to be keen on appropriating to himself the golden nose-ring. What was stopping him now from doing what he wanted?

The sharp rebuke administered to him by his fellow-men brought him to a sense of reality. But he just could not make himself pull out the nose-ring. And so he blurted out, "How shamefully absurd! How could I possibly take home the nose-ring of this deceased female? Do you forget that the dead woman had conceived in sin?" His comrades enquired, "Will you then not accept the nose-ring? Are we to consign to fire the dead body as it is?"

Jagu Tiadi replied absent-mindedly, "Yes, by all means! Please consign the corpse to flames! Throw it into the burning pyre! For God's sake, please see that every part of it is reduced to ashes."

The funeral pyre blazed with a sudden burst of flame. Like a hungry voracious beast it pounced upon the corpse to swallow it, as it were, in one gulp. The pale and fair flower got baked on the burning pyre and turned black. Instant abscesses were formed on the body and layers of

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skin were peeled off, one after the other.

Jagu Tiadi watched the burning corpse in grim silence. The owl screeched from among the bushes round a young 'Kochila' tree. The light of the burning pyre revealed that there was agitation among a host of vultures huddled on the top of some tall trees at a distance. Swarms of dragon-beetles that lived in the sandy soil of the cremation ground hopped out of the patch of fire. And from beyond the paddy fields near-by came the piercing howl of a big male-jackal.

The developing darkness added a new dimension to the scene of filth, ashes, charcoals, bleached bones and skulls. The stink of burning flesh wafted by breeze, spread over the entire cremation ground.

The following remarks intended for Jagu's hearing were made by the funeral party, "You have indeed acted wisely and preserved the sanctity of your home by not accepting the golden nose-ring of that adulteress. If you had, great evil might have befallen you. It is divine justice that she should have died while trying to kill the child in her womb."

Jagu heard these remarks while surveying the burning remains of the body, and spoke out, visibly annoyed, "Don't you sit in judgement on others, please!" □

Translated from Oriya by M/s. J. Mohapatra & Co.

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Godless

Kishori Charan Das

I AM not godless, not really. Anyone who knows me will accept the statement. Even Abhiram Babu has told me that all said and done, I possess a clean heart and I can love God. True, I can love Him if He is like Abhiram Babu. But I know He is unlike him or anybody else. To put it straight, He does not exist.

That is my conviction and I need not have to change it now. But I am not godless. I am prone to greater affection than hate. I can never kill a person in fact or in imagination. I love the silent shimmerings of Nature and little creatures of the earth—the tremulous pool of water in the courtyard, the kitten in the basket licking his body all over in lazy time, the tender "Aswattha" leaf emerging in fear and trembling from a crack in the wall, the fearless sparrow pecking at the mirror. I love all children.

Do I not suffer so, at this moment, from so much love?

I have not met Abhiram Babu for a long time. Could it be that he does not want to see me? No, I do not think so. I have also not been

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able to make it, for I have no respite these days from office work. I shall go to his place next Sunday, I must. And I will take my son along.

The red rubber ball of my son has strayed to the rear end of the courtyard and is getting soaked in rain. He is gazing at his ball. Seems as though he is asking the thing to help him in his thoughts of the recent past. His thoughts are surely laced with my sorrows. I feel like telling him everything. He does not understand the divine stuff and can weep for me.

. . . I came to know Abhiram Babu about one year back when I moved to Calcutta. He works for the State Government, his office is close to mine—in the adjoining wing of a three-storeyed building.

We saw each other for the first time one day at the lunch-hour, on opposite sides of a greasy marble-top table, in the canteen on the ground floor. That was my trial visit to the canteen in a bid to cut down on expenses. I was on the point of beating a retreat, thanks to the smoke, dirt and the sweating crowd, when I found an untouched plate of snacks placed before a gentleman engaged in deep meditation. The meditation over, he offered a portion of the food to his gods. He gave me an instant smile when he saw me, and said, "Won't you be seated, please?"

It was more curiosity than a desire to make friends. I sat on the chair opposite and noted—here is one of those godmen.

I have a strong prejudice against these people. Yet I was taken in by his bland smiles, untouched as it were by pleasure, and the gentle unhurried words. I thought it may well be nice to have lunch with him, once in a while, in the canteen. He will not be bad company for half-an-hour on a tiring day. He will at least not intrude on my leisure by talking big and wise, like many of my colleagues.

Eventually I found that he was not merely given to religion, he was also a lover of God. He would even get excited by hearing "Ram Dhun" over the canteen radio. He would lose track of the conversation and would sometimes be lost entirely to the outside world, sitting there like an animated block of stone. Getting back to his senses he would give the standard smile and offer apologies for being impolite.

He may not be a good-looker, but there is nothing apparently wrong in his features. A small frame, fair complexion and a balding forehead would about sum up the general impression. He also comes to office neatly clad in a sober suit or pants-and-bushshirt like other officers. His gestures, manner of speech and modes of laughter do not reveal any oddity either. On the whole I found nothing in him that is apt to tickle you in your idle moments,—excepting the certain weakness of an emotion that refuses to stay under cover, his love of God.

He hardly talks about himself. But I wanted to take advantage of his good nature and get at the roots of his extraordinary godliness. Most people in this world are on the side of God, but I have rarely come

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across such a specimen of love for that invisible and unknown person. Those in whom I have noticed the aberration are proclaimed saints and sadhus, or the illiterate non-beings of the countryside. They belong to alien worlds, not inhabited by sane intelligent men like me and Abhiram Babu.

So once I pounced on him. We were standing somewhere in the Chowringhee maidan on a July afternoon. The problem calling for our urgent attention was to find a tram bound homeward which would allow us a reasonable foothold. Abhiram Babu was looking anxiously at the dark clouds.

"What is the image of your God?" I asked him.

The suddenness took him unawares and he stared at me. I reframed the question for his benefit. "I mean, what is the image in which you happen to see Him? Father, mother, friend, child, wife, mistress or any other?"

He ignored the sarcasm, and answered me like giving a piece of information in his usual level tone. "I do not see God. I feel Him." A tram not overcrowded on the footboard stopped near us at this moment, and we rushed to get inside, among others.

We were able to plant our feet somehow on the available space and were trying to keep steady with one hand clutching at the railing and the other clinging to the brief-case. Abhiram Babu found it possible to conclude his statement in this situation. "You know what I meant by feeling Him? I gather myself completely. It seems I do not have any wants, not any more."

The conductor came jostling among the passengers to ask for the fare. I managed to bring out the coins with painful contortions and handed over the fare for both of us. Whereas I noticed my companion holding his ground in an immobile posture, unmindful of the conductor. And then he laughed for no reason and said, "I remember a funny incident. Once I had closed my eyes at prayers. When I opened them I found that my daughter Indu, sitting by my side, had also kept her eyes closed. She opened her eyes in a moment and smiled at me with her two upper teeth. That is all. As if we had got hold of some hidden treasure between ourselves. None else was supposed to know about it." He laughed again and added, "She is a naughty one! Teases me all the time—but she loves me too much."

Shortly he came to realize that he had not paid for his tram fare and had indulged in unnecessary talk about himself. He offered the fare with apologies and fell into a long silence.

I told him inwardly—your philosophy wears the mystic veil of words and ignorance. Never mind. I can see how you love your daughter. She is no God, but warm and living and real.

I longed to meet the naughty little girl with a revealing pair of teeth.

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. .Her name was Chandrika. About ten years of age. The two upper teeth refusing to close were indeed cute. The nose was tilted upwards with the hint of a button and the nostrils were definite. The thick hair was well and truly groomed in oil and turned back severely—as with village girls—to form a broad pigtail decked in red ribbon and a marigold.

She and my son came to be friends at first sight. So much so, my son could dare to snatch the flower in her pigtail after a few minutes, and Indu ran after him in a fascinating mix of laughter and tears.

Abhiram Babu had visited us with family and we were both enjoying the scene.

"Why do you call her Indu?" I asked him. "Her name is Chandrika, no ?"

He must have been asked this question by many. For he appeared to settle himself nicely for the luxury of telling a twice-told yet vastly interesting tale. "You know what happened—she had a round face and plump cheeks from the very beginning. So I and her mother decided that she must have something to do with the moon. She chose the name Chandrika and I preferred Indumati. ."

The story was briefly stated. But he sought to give it the dimensions of an instructive episode, what with his enthusiasm and zest for detail.

Very soon we came round to talk about other matters. Abhiram Babu was back to his normal self—a peace-loving man of few words who finds everything basically good in the world. There is nothing particularly wrong with the policies of Government . . however, the people have a reasonable cause for grievance . . it is all a question of methods and procedure and will be sorted out in the near future . . so-and-so is not really a bad person, one has to take into account the circumstances. Muted comments, mild disclaimers and an invocation to peace.

Dash it! Does not this man feel intensely about anything? Doesn't he suffer ? . . Should he not be made to suffer like you and me, so that he can understand the facts of life?

The moment passed and I felt ashamed. He is a real godman, I told myself, and hence genuinely foolish.

Meanwhile the children were carrying on with their endless games. Sometimes my son joined Indu in building a doll-house of stones and sand, forgetting that it was a girlish affair. And sometimes they were seen kicking and tossing the ball around, like nobody's business. The big rubber ball seemed to hold a particular attraction for Indu, for she was giving it a mighty kick now and then, and shouting- -g-o-a-l!

The play gave over in a finále of thunder and lightning. The ball driven powerfully by Indu hit my son on the nose and he burst out laughing. My son avenged the insult by eliminating her doll-house. In

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the result, both came running to their parents, flushed with anger, asking for instant redress.

Well, well . . we tried to defuse the situation by petting and patting and vague promises for the future. But they wanted results here and now. Abhiram Babu looked at his watch, and it seemed that the best way out of the impasse was to call it a day.

Then we heard the sing-song call to temptation—

the little boy will play
Oh my little girl will play
the little boy . .

to the accompaniment of music of sorts from the toys and dolls.

My son pricked his ears. His eyes shone in anticipation. The toyman! He was a familiar figure in our neighbourhood, but had not been much of a success with this boy's father. I had been able to keep him away from the noisy trinkets- -these are the cheap ones, girlish stuff, etc. But now he seemed to be in hope, looking avidly back and forth. Today you have your little boy as also the little girl. Will you still say no? Will you?

He would scarcely wait for the signal. He rushed out to greet the toyman, with Indu in tow. The angry moments were forgotten.

"Like the horse? Look how he swings his tail . ."

"No, I will take that bird, the one with the red beak."

"How about the frog? ugh!"

The desired birds and animals were soon acquired.

The bizarre sound of the music mingled with joyous laughter. Son and daughter, the little boy and the little girl were equally happy.

"When are you coming again?" I asked Indu when they were about to leave. "Let him come first", said the lady affecting a solemn tone. The young man nodded assent. The agreement was sealed by a generous, rather ungainly, grin on both sides.

. . They have not met each other since that day.

I was meeting Abhiram Babu fairly often. But I could not visit him with family. To start with, a certain laziness. Then they left for their village-home on a vacation for two months. About a fortnight before the vacation was due to expire there was a telephone call- -the soft slow syllables of our friend—"Namaskar. We have come back." After a brief exchange of pleasantries he said almost casually that Indu was not keeping fit and that was why they had to shorten their stay in the village.

I went directly to his place from my office, that evening. Abhiram Babu was effusive in his welcome and treated me to the special sweets brought from home.

I looked for Indu. Abhiram Babu said that she was in bed with a slight fever. His wife added that she was having some peculiar illness,

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she was merely nibbling at her food and was getting thinner day by day. Abhiram Babu sought to tone down her concern by mildly negative gestures, as if it was not quite proper to impose the obligation of sympathy on another person.

I did not quite like his attitude of otherness. Was not Indu a daughter to me? I said I would like to see her.

Indu was sleeping. I found she had really gone thin. I moved my palm caressingly around her forehead and offered the assurance that she would get well very soon.

But there were no signs of her getting well. The fever did not subside. The city doctor was confirmed in his diagnosis that it was typhoid. He also said that several complications had set in, but there was no cause for anxiety.

Yet there was no noticeable change in the behaviour of Abhiram Babu. He was coming to the office regularly, was having lunch in the canteen, was talking inoffensive politics and was getting lost unpredictably in meditations. Once I even saw him offer his naive smile to the sick child, when her mother tried to conceal her tears. The moon-faced Indu- -her cheeks were still fairly round even as the body had shrunk to a bare skeleton—answered him in the same token. As if they were playing the old game of communing with each other after prayers. We know the score, you and me. Mother would not know- -poor thing!

Strange, how they seek to relate in sadness. The scene called for abundant sympathy. More abundant than acute, for the sadness seemed to be so out-of-the world, almost inhuman, a bare idea of the limitless blue and the deep where the bubbles say hello to each other. I did not like it. I looked for the sorrowing mother, she was my kind.

I consoled her as best as I could. I said the doctor was banking on fifty per cent hope and we could provide the balance with our prayers. I hastened to add that I was not referring to God. By prayers I meant the outpouring of emotions, the fear and fervent wish and all, for the one we love . . does it not amount to something?

. . Suddenly my son changed the scenario. He caught fever. Two days later his body was full of sores. The doctor pronounced without a moment's hesitation that it was smallpox, which was raging like wild fire in the city.

I must say I felt somewhat exalted when I passed on the news to Abhiram Babu. I have also been touched by tragedy. Let me have the appropriate awe and respect from you all. I begged to be excused for not being in a position to visit him for sometime more, and asked him not to come to my place so as to avoid infection.

But in a few days his condition became critical. I swept aside the beguiling veil of tragedy and felt the raw pain. The pain of the living body. The thousand angry sores, they were torturing him with needles

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and red-hot metal. He was crying, my son.

I tried to comfort him in the manner of Abhiram Babu. I tried to console his mother. But I could not control my own restlessness. I wanted to create or destroy something, so that I could gather a sense of power . . and spread it like anodyne on his face.

Once I saw the shadow of death in his eyes. No use asking the doctor. He would only nod his head like a know-all and say—wait, let us see. That evening I could not bear the sight of that lighted room, laden with numerous bottles of medicine, the unceasing tears of his mother, the many orange peels and pomegranate seeds, and the pungent odour of the "neem" leaves. The excessive exercise to extend life seemed like a cruel joke. Why suffer him to live if he has to die? And why keep him in death if he means to live? Why this prolonged agony of the seconds and minutes . .?

I wanted to be left alone and went to the room-top. I surveyed the bright millions in the sky. Down below I observed my fellow-men. Somebody is searching his garage with a flashlight for a precious piece of property. Precious indeed! He does not know a thing about my son nor does he care. Somewhere a glass window reveals the enjoyment of an evening, food and drink and company. Two men of burden are dragging on and on with a loaded cart. The sentry at the gate of the Police Barracks is counting stars.

Prayers? Does it have to come to prayers at last? Am I one of those intellectual weaklings, who demolish God by logic of words and yet run for help to OUR FATHER at the sight of a ghost?

I did not yield to temptation. I did not pray . . I remembered Abhiram Babu.

Indu and Abhiram Babu. He does not suffer like me for he is safe in the cocoon of a lie.

And then it came upon me that one of them will die. One of them will die so that the other may live.

How do you smother a wish that overtakes you? How do you deny the passage of a shooting star? It is inconceivable that I bore him any malice or that I did not love Indu like my own daughter. Yet, I wished and believed that my son will recover. Indu will die. It will not hurt Abhiram Babu, for he is a man of God. That is how it should be.

The men behind the glass window laughed a little too loudly, and all those men in view in houses and streets seemed to move at a faster pace. At a faster pace and together. Even the racing cars and the sentry standing at his post appeared to be bound together in purpose and movement . . like performers in a grand opera. Only I was not there. I was the outsider. Godless.

I went down the steps in a scare. I sat beside my son on the sick-bed. His mother looked at me with tired eyes and asked "Where had you

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been? There was a telephone call just now. Abhiram Babu."

"What did he say?"

My fear and anxiety did not reach her. She intoned listlessly. "He enquired about our son and said that Indu has again taken a turn for the worse . ."

There is hardly anything more to say. I could not go to see Indu on her last day. My wife was there. She told me that nobody knows if Abhiram Babu wept for his daughter. For he shut himself inside a room for hours and was looking normal, with no trace of tears on his face, when he came out.

This is what I had imagined. I have no cause for remorse.

But do they mean to say that my sorrow is a mere luxury of the aftermath? The pretence of not being able to heave the sigh of relief? That man will pass by my lane any time now. Or he may not. But I hear him toll the bell constantly, unreasonably, in my waking hours . .

The little boy will play.

Oh my little girl will play . .

I shall not buy anything from him, ever. □

Translated from Oriya by the author

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Farewell to a Ghost

Manoj Das

IT was on moonlit nights that the deserted villa looked particularly fascinating. From the river-bank we looked at it in long silences. When in spasmodic breezes the tall yellow grasses around it swayed in waves, it looked like one of those fairy-tale phantom castles floating on an unreal sea. But though pale, desolate and eerie, I must repeat, it was fascinating.

Generally we didn't talk during the night. But the next morning one of us would confide to another and we would all know by evening that he had caught a glimpse of the girl standing on the broken terrace gazing at the moon or looking down at the river shedding tears which looked like drops of gold.

It was nothing new, yet we were thrilled every time and would stand on the river-bank again the next evening.

Any of us village boys would have done anything to help her in some way. But we knew we could do nothing. She was so near, but she belonged to a far-away world. Besides, it was necessary to check

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the temptation of becoming too much enamoured of her. We had all heard again and again about the gallant lad of a bygone generation who had fallen in love with her. There was a big banian tree which stood in its mighty aloneness on the point of the river-bank closest to the villa. The lad had often slipped away from his home and climbed the tree. Settling down on a branch, he would gaze for long hours into the crumbling room on the top of the villa through its weather-beaten window.

Apparently he could see her sitting inside the room on the cot in her usual melancholy. But did she ever see him? Yes, occasionally. Otherwise why should the lad have fallen down from the tree, unconscious, not once but thrice? It was all right as long as you could look at a ghost without the ghost looking at you. It is only when the ghost looks into your eyes that you faint.

Finally, one summer noon, throwing to the winds all the stern warnings of his well-wishers, he had crept into the villa, climbed the decrepit stairs and peeped into the room.

Perhaps the girl was asleep, for it was said that she wept the whole night and slept most of the day, sobbing in her sleep.

He should have behaved more prudently. Even a generation later we boys censured him for his rashness and pitied him. To be in love was dangerous enough. And to be in love with a ghost was terribly perilous. How could he have forgotten that?

But he had rushed up and kissed her before she could stop him.

She had shrieked. Many had heard her giggling, sobbing and her mad babbling, but that was the only time anyone had heard her shriek.

The shriek probably would not have been heard by you or me, but just then a popular erratic mendicant happened to be passing by. He roamed about in the cemeteries of our area, coming into the village only when hungry—once in two or three days. He could understand the language of crows and cows. Evidently, he could also hear what others could not. When the villagers discussed the missing lad he revealed that he had heard the unusual ghost-shriek.

A dozen of brave men of our village entered the villa next morning. They had sprinkled on their heads the sacred water of the Ganges and had hid pieces of iron under their girdles so that the ghost could not come too close to them. But I can swear, no one even thought of carrying sticks or weapons. No one would have done anything to offend the girl in any way.

They found the lad lying on the hundred-year-old cotton mattress on the cot inside the room upstairs—dead.

That he had kissed the girl was conclusively proved not only by the girl's sudden shriek, but also by the flow of blood from the lad's mouth. That of course is the price one pays for kissing a ghost.

It was indeed a grim warning. But the people's affection for the ghost

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did not decline. What could she do if people fell in love with her? She had never asked them to. She had not killed the unfortunate lover! She could not undo the fatal curse that separated her world from ours. Not once during the hundred years she had been there had she tried to lure away or possess anybody.

It could even have been more than hundred years. In those days the *feringhees* cultivated indigo over large areas. They were concentrated in Bengal, but some had spread to the neighbouring land, that is, our State, Orissa. Their experiment did not succeed on our soil and they soon packed off leaving behind the imposing house they had built.

As the legend goes, three young *feringhees* had brought a girl with them. She had been kidnapped or brought from the Sundarbans. She was the illegitimate daughter of a sahib by a tribal woman and combined in her the ravishing freshness and wilderness of her mother's race with the light complexion of her father.

Because of her strange origin she could not mix with our womenfolk. It was out of the question for our women to befriend a girl with white blood.

From the very beginning the girl revolted against her masters. She was brutally punished. After several attempts to escape had been foiled she pretended to have been tamed, and she allowed a year or so to pass.

But one day the *feringhees* had to go to their headquarters on business. There was an epidemic of smallpox in the area and the *feringhees*, avoiding native contact, rowed themselves to the town. When the current was favourable it took only a day to reach the town.

They reached the town all right, though a little late, the next morning. A number of excited crows circled over the boat. The three young *feringhees* lay stiff and cold around a carrier of half-eaten food.

The girl had prepared the lunch for them. She had obviously prepared it with the choicest poison.

The girl had had an accomplice in this her desperate bid for liberty, the keeper of the villa, a sly fellow who had been with the company for many years. The girl knew where the *feringhees* had hidden their gold and money. The understanding was that both would escape with the wealth. But once she had uncovered the caćhe the rascal had stabbed her and disappeared.

Three days later, more *feringhees* appeared. Outraged, they forced the villagers at bayonet point to bury the girl's body and searched every house for the killer. A lot of Ganges water had to be procured from the neighbouring villages to purify the houses thus defiled.

But all this had faded into a painless memory. It was only casually that people now referred to these incidents. The fate of the *feringhees* or the murderer of the girl did not interest them. It was only the girl that mattered—I mean her ghost. We always thought of her as one of

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us, although we knew quite well she was different. Apart from being a ghost she was of white blood—that had come from beyond the seven seas. Although we knew that blood had lost much of its relevance after she had become a ghost we could not help being a little more respectful towards her on that account.

There never passed a feast—whether due to birth, marriage or death—without an offering being carried into the compound of the villa, in the dead of night. Some young people would carry the food in earthen pots. An earthen lamp too would be carried. The party would always be led by a respectable elderly man, generally the head-pundit of the primary school. We juniors were allowed to view the scene only from a distance. After the pots and the lamp had been placed between the villa and the banian tree, the head-pundit would intone: "Unhappy girl, here is your share of the feast which has been given by the benevolent so and so on such and such occasion. Be satisfied with this. And so far as it is in your power we ask you to guard the village from evil. We have never tried to dislodge you or disturb you, have we? No. But why not? Because we look upon you as almost one of our daughters. God give you peace!"

The party would leave the place without looking back.

And nobody was supposed to look into the compound thereafter. But we did look, hiding from the adults, from our favourite spot on the river-bank. In the flickering flame of the earthen lamp and the dance of the fluctuating shadows we felt as though we saw something mysterious. Our hair stood on end.

The lamp would suddenly go out. "Naturally, she does not relish our watching her eat", one of us would say, and we would leave her alone.

"But she obeys the head-pundit, doesn't she? The pundit knows how to speak to her", the head-pundit's pet pupil would observe as we re-joined the feasting crowd. "Who on earth does not obey him!" would be the retort from his rival.

I had, however, a feeling that when the head-pundit implored her to guard the village against evil what he really meant was that she herself should not cause any harm to our village. His words, I felt, even implied a threat. What else did he mean when he reminded her that we had never tried to dislodge or disturb her?

I felt embarrassed. She was so innocent and so good. What right had the head-pundit to be hypocritical towards her?

Strong hot wind blew during the summer afternoon for days on end. During these hours everything was quiet except the wind. The wooden doors of the entrance and the windows of the villa had disappeared a long ago. Violently exploring every nook and corner of the villa the wind produced a variety of shrieks and whistles. I do not know why I was

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fascinated by these sounds. My father wanted me to sleep then, but I would sit up in bed listening intently to the sounds. Secretly I even felt like going into the villa, for no other reason than to give the girl a moment's silent company. But, I was afraid she might not understand my purpose. That checked me.

One day, feeling bold and a little proud, I admitted to myself that this was like falling in love, and I blushed. Maybe, other boys of thet village also felt like me. It never occurred to us that the girl was a least a hundred years older than us. Some wise man had told us that once one had become a ghost he or she never grew in age.

It was when we were preparing for the Middle School Examination that the shocking news came. The Government had decided to demolish the crumbling villa and use the land for some other purpose. No wonder that we forgot our studies and hid behind the school wall to listen to the elders discussing the issue in the evening.

"Can't we request the Government to spare the villa?"

"No. Since the local Zemindar was declared bankrupt the land had become the property of the Government. The Government does not show any consideration for ghosts", the village headman said and his statement was followed by a prolonged silence and intermittent coughs and yawns.

Then a lizard tick-ticked and two or three people muttered, "True, true!"

"But what will happen to the girl? She has lived there all these years, has never harmed us. There are innumerable reasons to believe that she is a benevolent ghost."

The lizard tick-ticked again and this time more people said, "True, true!"

The discussion continued for a long time. All agreed that something had to be done for the girl. But nobody had a surplus house to offer her. And however good a ghost she might be, a ghost was still a ghost and keeping her with one's family was not a practical proposition. But if nothing was done for her she would naturally come and settle in somebody's house.

It was perhaps midnight when they came to a decision. Long before that our mothers or uncles had found us out behind the wall and had driven us back home.

At the request of the villagers the demolition work was delayed for a few days. On an auspicious day a renowned priest, well-versed in necromancy, was brought from miles away. He was tall and hefty, with a round red mark on his forehead. He wore a garland of beads which we were told were carved out of the spine of a notorious witch. He never smiled.

It was a day of melancholy for us all. Outwardly too the day was

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gloomy with clouds and it drizzled from time to time.

Almost every family had brought a little food—rice, bananas, coconuts, sweetmeats or cakes—to offer to the girl. Nobody was barred from witnessing the ceremony and so the whole village pressed near the villa. For many peopje, particularly women and children, it was their very first entry into the compound.

The presents were arranged in a semi-circle on the verandah. In front of them the priest placed a parcel and slowly removed its cover It was a complete human skull. There was a stick of bone too. He recited some mantras while drawing figures in the air with the bone and then, his face flushing, shouted menacingly, "But where is she? I have pronounced my command already thrice. She should have appeared before me immediately. How dare she be so obstinate?"

The headman said apologetically, "Look, Baba, she must be sleeping upstairs. She rarely sleeps at night, you know!"

"I will then go up and drag her down by her ear. She will realize that I am not one to go unheeded", hollered the priest and he climbed the stairs.

We looked at each other helplessly. I felt like weeping. Should not somebody have told the priest that she was not to be treated rudely?

We could hear the priest's thudding footsteps upstairs. And then he roared something incomprehensible and the sound and its echo made beads of sweat break out on our faces even on that cool morning.

He soon came back triumphantly and said in a commanding tone, "There. Eat everything to your heart's content and then leave the house!"

We had almost ceased to breathe. The priest looked at us with contempt and suddenly yelled at the top of his voice, "What! You will not eat? Mind you, that is not going to soften me. Eat or not, you must leave the villa and the village now, instantly."

The headman managed to say, "Baba, you should perhaps wait a little. She has never disobeyed us. She will eat. Please tell her that it is our earnest request. Our womenfolk have brought these presents with much love!"

But the priest did not seem to care. "She is leaving. Make way!" he shouted at us. Immediately the crowd parted.

She did not eat. But when commanded to leave she did so without delay. We did not see her, true. But we knew how deeply wounded she must have felt. We felt extremely small.

"Come on. That is right. I will lead you", the priest said and slowly walked through the crowd showing the invisible spirit the way with the pointed bone in his right hand. With the left hand he gave some directions to his assistant who remained behind and collected the magic skull and, I believe, all the foodstuff.

All followed the priest. The village was left behind and we walked

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through the meadow for nearly a mile, braving the drizzle and the fear of a heavy rain.

"Stop!" commanded the priest standing under a tall palm tree. Then he uttered strange incantations and beat the tree with the bone and circled it a number of times.

"So, from now on this will be your dwelling. Understand?" The priest bellowed looking up to the top of the tree.

He then grinned at us proudly and said in a rather pompous tone, "She can never leave the tree. I have bound her to it!"

Now all turned back. We boys walked with the women, slowly, while the menfolk, walking faster, surrounded the priest ahead of us.

We walked in silence. But at one point someone sobbed. Then everyone was weeping as quietly as possible.

When we reached the village the workmen had already started pulling down the villa. Rain should make their work easy, the contractor informed the headman.

After three or four days of rain the sky became clear. The moon shone bright and as on other moonlit nights we boys gathered behind the village to pay ha-tu-tu. But there was no spirit in our play. Eventually someone said, "The ground here is quite low. Can't you see it is still damp? Why not go farther into the meadow where the ground is high and dry?"

No sooner had he said this than we began to run. Soon we were near the palm tree and our hearts were in the game. We played on late into the night, happy to be near our lonely ghost.

And we returned almost every evening till the summer vacation was over.

At the end of the vacation I went to the town for admission to a High School. I had never lived in a town before. Soon I became engrossed in a variety of interesting things. I forgot about the ghost.

Three months later it was Puja vacation and I was returning to my home. From the nearest bus-stop I had to walk several miles to reach my village. I was in high spirits. Suddenly, while crossing the meadow, my eyes fell on the palm tree and for a moment I felt as though my legs were paralyzed. The tree was dead. It had been struck by lightning. Its branches were charred and crumbling.

With a heavy heart I started walking again. During the fortnight's holiday none of the boys spoke of the girl. And as it was the rainy season, there was no question of our going to play in the meadow. Gradually I passed the age of playing ha-tu-tu and my visits to the village became rarer.

And the new generation of village boys were so different, so ignorant. They were just afraid of ghosts, □

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Doors to Silence

Krushna Prasad Mishra

AS soon as he woke up from his sleep, his eyes fell on the book-case, and the admirable arrangement of books. Mahesh immediately closed his eyes, as if hoping to see something more pleasant, when he opened them again—something like the photograph of Sumitra, all smiles, with the tenderness of the morning sky, or something like roses in the garden, or the trees which will soon be in blossom. But when he opened his eyes again, he could only see the same shelf full of books. Then it dawned on him that he was not in his bedroom, but in the drawing room. This was nothing new; it had been so the past few days. After getting up, he felt like lying down again for a little while near Sumitra in the bedroom. But he knew that was not possible any longer. Sumitra had made him conscious that he had no longer had any place on the same bed. This realization had come to him not suddenly, but gradually as the seasons change or man grows old. He would not have felt that way if Sumitra had given him some subtle hints. It was really strange how it happened. Getting up from the divan with a strange

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tiredness, he remembered reading somewhere that the touch of a woman gives and takes away youth from man. Mahesh stared hard at the book-case. He never expected this from Sumitra. But it is not right to break a vow. Mahesh remembered . . .

He was terribly sleepy. He had returned from tour and was very tired after driving the car over a long distance. After reaching home, he had gone to the bathroom straightaway. The children were asleep, except for the youngest one. After a bath and dinner, he had gone straight to the bed without even looking at the newspaper which he had not read. He had not the faintest idea when Sumitra had come to sleep.

Those days, the youngest one used to sleep between them, when he went to bed. Sumitra would, however, move the child to one side when they went off to sleep, and would herself sleep near Mahesh. That day, in spite of his exhaustion, due to his tiring journey, Mahesh found it natural to sleep in the middle, changing his place with the young one. But in the middle of the night he found Sumitra nudging him to go to the other side of the bed. Through his slumber he heard the alarm clock go off followed by the sharp voice of Sumitra. "Get up and go to the other side, and shift the child to the middle. The elder daughter will get up just now; she had set the alarm clock to study in the middle of the night. Go to the other side."

Instead of going to the other side of the bed, Mahesh started kissing Sumitra holding her in tight embrace. That was their post-marriage pact—whoever first got up in the night was to embrace and kiss the other one first. But Mahesh had to get up when Sumitra shoved him hard and moved on to the other side of the bed. For a moment he thought of reacting to Sumitra's behaviour, but instead he again fell asleep, in sheer lazy domesticity.

It was eight o'clock next morning when Sumitra woke him up with a cup of tea in her hand. The moment he woke up, Mahesh asked Sumitra very irritably about her strange behaviour of the night before. Sumitra had given a very straightforward reply. How cruel can a woman be when the time comes,—Mahesh thought to himself while listening to her.

The children sleeping in the next room had to cross their room to go to the bathroom. The light in their room used to be left burning the whole night, and the connecting door kept open to keep an eye on the children. The eldest was a grown-up girl going to the college. Mahesh suggested that the children ought to use the other bathroom which they could go to without entering their room. He also argued that they ought to keep the connecting door closed, for what were doors for if they were not bolted?

But Sumitra did not agree with any of his ideas. She thought Mahesh heartless when he spoke of such an arrangement. How could he think of

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shutting themselves off from the children sleeping in the next room? It was ridiculous. What if something happened to them? Mahesh did not argue any more. He put down the teacup in disgust.

A few days later, Sumitra told him—"Please tie your clothes properly before sleeping, or wear a Pajama. Your dhoti had slipped off when you got up this morning. The door was open, and the children must have gone to the bathroom this way." Mahesh felt like giving Sumitra a slap and telling her that this was bound to happen if they kept the door open. But he controlled himself. From that night he started sleeping on the drawing room divan. While going to the drawing room with a bedsheet and pillow, he used to remember about the days when he was newly married. At that time, they used to stay in a flat in the suburb of Calcutta. Like every other newly married couple, they also had their own private language which they alone understood. They had named their bedroom Digambar Temple. But this private joke had caused them a lot of embarrassment. Once chatting with friends in the drawing room, Mahesh wanted to write something, and asked Sumitra to get the pen. When Sumitra could not find the pen on the study table, Mahesh shouted "Should be under the pillow in the Digambar Temple." There was silence for a while, but when the meaning sunk in one of the friends gave a loud laugh and it did not take the others long to join in the laughter. Sumitra did not come out for quite sometime and joined them much later.

Somebody had closed the bathroom door from inside. Mahesh sat on the edge of Sumitra's bed, waiting to go in. The other bathroom was engaged and he had to wait. Sumitra was asleep. Mahesh felt like sleeping for a while and leaned on Sumitra's back. The bathroom door could open any moment and the young son might wake up. You never grow old, thought Mahesh, only your children grow up very quickly.

The daughter came out of the bathroom. She resembled her mother, and was wearing one of her mother's *sarees*. This was very wrong, he thought, this wearing each other's *sarees*. The other day while he was going to embrace Sumitra, she turned around and Mahesh was shocked to find that it was their daughter. That day he quarrelled with Sumitra. There was no need to exchange *sarees* with the daughter as there was no dearth of *sarees* at home. But instead, Sumitra advised him to give up his bad habit of kissing and embracing her at odd times. It is not proper to continue these habits, she said, after the children are grown-up. At that time Mahesh had just returned from office, and he started off for the garden. When he felt very sad, he went to the plants in the garden, and tried to forget his unhappiness by plucking dry and moth-eaten leaves from the trees. When they had moved into the house, there was not a single tree in the garden; they had planned the garden together, and it was now a beautiful patch of green. Before going to the garden

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he asked Sumitra: "You don't want me to sleep near you at night, touch you at day time, and you want me to leave all my bad habits. What will I do then? How will I live?" Sumitra busied herself with her household chores without replying to him.

Mahesh looked at his daughter again and went inside the bathroom. How fast has she grown up! Her eyes and complexion are just like her mother's. While Mahesh was washing his face Sumitra entered the bathroom. She took the towel from Mahesh's hands and said—"Do you know what happened last night? At midnight Mini came to me. She was very scared. It seems somebody was going to strangle her."

Mahesh kept quiet. Sumitra came closer to Mahesh and whispered: "At that time I was coming to you."

Mahesh looked at Sumitra. He felt as if he was standing on one side of the garden and was listening to a disembodied voice floating down towards him from the other side through thick foliage. Mahesh looked at Sumitra again. She had stopped talking and was busy washing her face. ☐

Translated from Oriya by Sm. Mitra Das

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Sabara

Chaudhury Hemakanta Misra

SABARA earned his living by selling wonders. He habitually referred to himself in the third person, as if somebody from the streets had given him the name—like "make Sabara's bed now", "Sabara likes *arhar dal*" or "Sabara will now take tea", etc. I was puzzled by his name and had once asked him how he came by it, when he merely laughed showing his gold-studded teeth, the way he smiled after the act of bringing forth lots of multi-coloured ribbons from his mouth.

When he came to our village the first time, he had a fat woman with him. She was Malli. Sabara cut her up and then joined her ; made her climb up a bamboo pole and, the 'bamboo queen' that she was, Malli turned like a fan on the top of the pole ; and then he made her senseless and asked her what was there in whose pocket. Once he put her inside a box and pierced the box with a lot of swords from outside, then tied the box around with a rope and locked it up, and then threw the box into a tub of water. And then, as everyone was shouting "No, no", he got a big stone from somewhere and threw that too on top of the box. There

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was a stunned and breathless silence ; just then Malli came out smilingly from the box, and not in her usual dirty, striped saree she had gone in with, but with a glittering royal dress! Claps thundered from all directions and on the brass platter kept on the ground there was a shower of countles coins. Sabara, who was so heedless when he was cutting up Malli carefully collected the coins and after counting them put them in the knitted wallet he had dangling from his waist. He now saluted everyone respectfully, with folded hands, and said, "Gentlemen, enough for today."

The next time he came to our village Malli wasn't there. We came to know later that she had eloped with someone. Instead, Sabara brought along a boy named Bhagia. He had a pair of big eyes which always seemed sleepy. Though his complexion was rather like cowdung, he was quite a good-looker. But, of course, the acts were not as attractive as they were with Malli. When she was in the box and swords were being shoved into the box, peoples' eyes were automatically closed tight. And when she came out with that glittering royal dress, she looked a fairy, although she was so fat that her breasts seemed to bulge out of the tight dress, and when she ran, her fat belly kept bouncing up and down. Indeed Malli was different. Now, when Bhagia emerged in a blue bloomer and a striped vest from the box, he batted his eyelids and smiled in such a manner as if he already knew the real secret and the act was nothing but a sleight of hand. Who could work as sincerely as Malli ? Towards the evening Bhagia could be seen cooking rice and *dal* for Sabara or washing a big brass plate by the pond with ashes and earth. It was clear from the beginning that Bhagia also would run away some day.

Just when and why Sabara's eyes fell on me, I don't remember. After Malli left Sabara, the number of applauding crowd dwindled to half. It was quite clear from the dresses and equipment that the business was not going too well. But the acts were becoming much more interesting to me. I noticed, though, that when Malli was there he could get all the clappings after one or two acts, but now nobody bothered.

He seated Bhagia at a distance and sat down, himself, at the other end. Sabara had a piece of paper in his hand with "Om Sri Hari" written on it. Bhagia shouted, "Come, come!" from his end and the piece of paper slowly glided towards Bhagia, as if it was attracted by the call. At his end, Sabara took another piece of paper. It was blank. He burnt that paper, collected its ashes and called someone from the crowd to rub the ashes on his bare back. Everyone could see now that his back had "Om Sri Hari" written on it. On the other side, the paper in Bhagia's hand had just nothing on it! No one had perhaps seen such an act in his whole lifetime, but no one clapped either, except me. I remember that Sabara had given me a strange kind of look. But how exactly, with what words and methods he had won me over and with what hope did I leave home

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and stole away with him, I don't really know. Anyway that is long past now.

I knew nothing—neither the secret tricks of sorcery nor the chores Bhagia did. I just wondered why at all did he bring me with him and add a third member to his troupe, when the income was so poor that meals for even two was hard to come by. To the best of my abilities I learnt all that Sabara taught me. To begin with I was quite shy, but it all turned out fine, in due course. We became very famous for one particular act. In that I would be the 'bamboo queen' turning like a fan on the top of the bamboo pole and then Bhagia would axe down the bamboo itself and Sabara would then put the bamboo pole with me on the top on his forehead and dance dee-dum-dum, while I would go on turning round and round on the top of the bamboo.

He bought beautiful sarees from the bazar and a lot of imitation ornaments and blouses and things to wear under them. I was very shy to wear those things at first, but I thought that in a way this was a good trick too, since no one would recognize me with them on. It was indeed great fun when I came to my village again with those things on. For strangely, nobody recognized me. What was worse, that mischievous fellow Mangulia winked at me a number of times and kept hovering around our camp towards the evening. He even offered money to Sabara in exchange for me and went away only after threats from Sabara. On the next day I came out for our usual begging round up to my own house, with Bhagia. Oh boy! Wasn't I afraid! I had been told that you could play tricks on anyone you liked, except, on your own mother. Still, I might as well take the risk, I thought. My heart of course was pounding like anything, but I had the head covered with one end of the saree and kept biting its corner, and then with Bhagia's hand in mine own I stood close to our front door. Bhagia called out, "O Mother-of-Sons, O Mistress-of-the House, O Mother, let the beggar get a handful, Mother!" Although we were not really begging, this was the routine. When people come out and see us, instead of the usual beggars, they would drop a coin or two in our open palms. Bhagia may then perform one or two acrobatic tricks for them and we would proceed to the next house. Bhagia had also a *changu drum* with him to play, I was only for show. When Malli had been there she would even sing a song or two, I was told.

The first to come out was my elder brother. A busy man, he wore always an irritated expression. He had the same expression when he flung some coins towards me, but when his eyes fell on my face, how his face softened . . . perhaps he became a little lost remembering something and then he again gave us some more coins and left. Bhagia saw that there was no need even to show acrobatics and was about to turn away. But he understood me when I whispered in his ears 'this is our house, stupid!' and shouted, 'O Mother-of-Sons, O Mistress-of-the House,

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a little water for us, O Mother!' That did it, and with a brass pitcher my mother came out to give us water.

How she must have cried when I had run away, I thought. When Bhagia was drinking water I had my fill of mother's face. After Bhagia had finished, mother looked at me and said—"Now you take it", but I turned my face from side to side in a gesture of declining the offer. Even a little slip in speech or movement would have given me away. If I had spoken a single word, from whatever distance, mother would have certainly recognized me. Bhagia was just waiting, with his mouth agape, to see when I would start crying. As always he was after some fun.

It went on fine like this till Bhagia ran away. When Bhagia was there, Sabara would awalys fondle and kiss me. He used to say, "you are my wife, you are my Malli, and that one is only a servant." He insisted that I wear those things even at home. One night I could know why Malli had run away. Sabara was impotent, but his hankering was no less, nor his restlessness.

Who cajoled Bhagia away we don't know. He had stolen whatever money was there in the camp—not a penny was left even for food. One pack of magic playing-cards, a bunch of invisible wires and the foam rubber egg which Sabara would put into a tin can, beat and pound on it and then bring it out unhurt, all in one piece, and show it to his audience—these were some of the things Bhagia had stolen.

When Bhagia left I had to wash the utensils and do all the chores and yet dress up glitteringly like a queen in a silk saree. If you clean utensils everyday how can you, possibly, maintain your beauty and delicacy? Sabara didn't fondle me that much any more. He threw utensils at me. Once he even started beating me saying, 'I brought this bloody rascal and that brought all my ruin.' When he got tired beating with his hands he started beating me liberally, with his feet. Afterwards he looked at me and cried bitterly himself. Then he tried to console me with soft words. "What could be your fault, everything is due to my own ill luck", he said. Then he kissed me on the cheeks and said everything was going to be all right from now on. "Listen", he said, "from now on we won't do just the acts, there ought to be good business. For otherwise Goddess Laxmi won't come to us." Then he gave me detailed instructions as to what should be done and sent me to the town nearby, to buy things for the acts.

At first Sabara started the usual ordinary acts to draw the crowd. But all the while he kept drumming his hand-drum and telling people, "Gentle masters, please don't leave the place. This is just nothing, the real act is coming, coming soon." That day he cut his tongue into two strips, put a wire through my throat and made me unconscious, made me the bamboo queen and laid me straight on a rope, caught hold of an onlooker and retrieved four eggs from him which he instantly ate up

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then and there; I could easily feel the old touch of the master in all the acts. Quite a crowd had already collected by the time the big act was over, and someone shouted, "Sabara, stop this nonsense, let's have the real thing now!" Sabara bowed low to him and performed a Salaam, unbuttoned his shirt, and lo and behold, a right royal red robe was inside. Even I was astonished to see the new dress. Where was such a beautiful thing kept all these days, I wondered. Then he stood up on a wooden packing-case and displayed a small bottle of red liquid to the crowd—"Gentle masters, what is in this bottle, what is in this bottle, what is it, what is it?" he said, and shook the bottle a little bit and,—dear me! Sabara had so many tricks up his sleeves! —That red liquid became milk-white. And Sabara continued, "This is a very wonderful thing, my dear masters, everything is due to the greatness of my Guru!" So saying, he brought out a little duckling and put a drop of the liquid into its mouth. It was instantly stiff and stone-dead. "Gentle masters, you see, this is a deadly poison. But Sabara says, this is not as simple as it looks. Sabara knows that if you drink a drop of it, even the snake's venom will vanish. Sabara is standing here to show you that."

Then he went outside the ring of the crowd and brought an earthen pitcher he had kept somewhere, "Gentle masters, what is there inside this pitcher? In the pitcher there is a deadly cobra. And Sabara will bring it out, Sabara will let it bite himself! Gentle masters, my fathers and mothers, this is an act of life and death. Let there be some money on the plate first, then the snake will be out."

Really there was a lot of money. I collected them and put them in an old cigarette tin. Sabara took the bottle from me and invoked many gods and prayed. Then saying 'Jai Guru' he opened the pitcher. The snake was hissing inside. He brought it out with his bare hands. It was really funny, dear sir, to see the crowd. People at the front were withdrawing in fear of the snake and at the same time people behind were pressing forward to see the act.

Sabara provoked the snake by touching its tail and the snake raised its hood and hissed loudly. Sabara played his little hand-drum and showed his hand till the snake bit him once. Sabara smiled and then put the snake in the pitcher and tied the cloth over it. Then he went round showing the spot where the snake had bitten him. Then he stood at a place to allow the poison to spread over his body. He started sweating, turned blue all over and froth came out from his mouth, but he had still that strange smile on him with his gold-studded tooth. He sat down and fell on the ground, shortly after. His body became stiff. Then at his signal, I put a drop of that medicine into his mouth.

Soon enough Sabara got up fresh and fine. A thundering applause shook the whole place. There was another shower of money. After I had finished collecting them Sabara stood upon the packing case and declared

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that the medicine was available with him for sale at the rate of just one rupee per bottle. Before he could even finish his sentence, the crowd started closing on him. Sabara shouted—"please don't worry—there is plenty of stock—everyone can have a bottle." He added that if by any chance one missed it today he would again come to the same spot the day after and give it to him.

Sabara and I could manage to get away from the crowd with the money. We could have been swamped by the people, but for the fact that Sabara could use the pitcher in his hand, like a weapon, to tear through them.

Back in the camp Sabara had me seated close to him. He brought out *poorie*, sweets and *Jalebis* from paper packets and insistently fed me more and more to surfeit. Then he gave me a hundred-rupee note and said, "You go your way." I cried a lot but Sabara said that he was going to give up this business himself. I should be a good boy and go home, because if we were caught, those who bought the medicine would not leave us alive. Then he changed his dress, packed and hired a coolie, and then went away. None has seen him after that. ☐

Translated from Oriya by the author

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Notes on Authors

Syed Abdul Malik

Born 1919. One of the foremost short-story writers and novelists of Assam. Has published a dozen novels and ten anthologies of short stories. His principal novels are: *Aghori Atmar Kahini*, *Adhar Shila*, *Suraj Mukhir Swapna*, *Banjui*, *Chabighar*, *Matir Chaki* and *Prachir Aru Prantar*. He provides a link between the *Awahon* and post-independence writing in Assamese literature by combining romantic sensibilities with psychological treatment in the development of characters. Is currently a Member of the Rajya Sabha.

Jogesh Das

Born 1927. A noted novelist and writer of short stories, who came to prominence in the late fifties and early sixties. He writes mostly of the social man, exposing the many evils and iniquities of the system. However, he avoids verbiage and allows his characters to tell their own story without comments from the author. His novel *Dawar aru nai* dealing

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with the ugliness of war is considered to be an outstanding work in Assamese literature. His best-known collections of short stories are: *Papla Tora, Andharer are are* and *Modarar Bedana.* He teaches Assamese in B. Barooah College, Gauhati.

Mahim Bora

Born 1926. Came to prominence in the sixties with his collection of short stories *Kathanil·ari Ghat.* Has published so far twelve collections of short stories, one novel and one collection of poems. His stories are generally socio-centric with evident sympathies for the small man. But his intenser perceptions are cleverly modulated by irony, and he etches his characters in vivid and cheerful detail as individuals rather than representatives of their class. Started his career as a journalist. Presently Head of Dept., Assamese in Nowgong College, Nowgong.

Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia

Born 1932. A noted film-producer, playwright and writer of short stories. Has published seven books of short stories and written more than one hundred plays for All India Radio. Among various awards received by him the most important are the Sahitya Akademi Award and Rajat Kamal Award as producer and director of the film *Sandhya Raag.* His stories are marked by uncompromising realism derived from psychological probes into the condition of man. With a doctorate in Physics from the University of London he taught Physics in Gauhati University till 1968. Has been a member of Sangeet Natak Akademi and continues to be a member of Sahitya Akademi. Presently Chief Editor of a literary journal *Prantik* published from Gauhati.

Nirupama Borgohain

Born 1932. Has been writing short stories, novels and essays since 1948. Has published eleven novels and four collections of short stories so far. Is a popular novelist, having a penchant for depicting middle-class life with deft and gentle touches of irony not unmixed with sentiment.

Dr Indira (Mamoni) Raison Goswami

Born 1942. Is a noted novelist and short story writer of today in Assam. Has published five novels and two collections of short stories apart from translations from Hindi and Malayalam fiction to Assamese. Her distinction lies mainly in projecting the life of persons who have

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been wronged by the social system, e.g. widows, destitutes and industrial workers. But her approach is psychological and she does not hesitate to bring out the passions and prejudices of man in the context of his sufferings. Has received Sahitya Akademi Award for 1982. Presently teaches Assamese in Delhi University.

Tarashankar Bandyopadhyaya (1898-1971)

One of the most popular and prolific novelists and short-story writers of Bengal in the twentieth century. Has written fifty novels, over one hundred fifty short stories, and several plays, three of which are adaptations of successful novels. His first novel *Chaitali Ghurni* was published in 1932 and the first successful novel *Raikamal* in 1934. *Ganadevata* is considered to be his most outstanding novel for which he received the Jnanpith Award. Among other awards and distinctions are: Sahitya Akademi Award and the title Padmabhushan conferred by the President of India. He will be remembered, in particular, for his portrayals of man and nature in rural Bengal, in grand dimensions of heroism and compassion, rare in modern writing.

Dr Balaichand Mukhopadhyaya ("Banaphul") (1899-1979)

A pathologist by profession who turned to writing and came to be one of the most succcessful writers of fiction and particularly of short stories in modern Bengal. With him short story attained the level of an exquisite literary craft, with a rigorous discipline of words and abundant irony. His works exceeding 100, include novels, short stories, plays and poems. Some of his most popular books are: *Jangam*, *Sthabar*, *Uday-Asta*, *Hatey-Bazare*, *Bhuban Shome* and *Banaphuler Shrestha Galpa*. Feature films based on two of his novels received the President's Gold Medal. Received several awards and distinctions including Rabindra Award and the title of Padmabhushan conferred by the President of India.

Sm. Ashapurna Debi

Born 1919. She is a unique phenomenon in the contemporary literary scene, having achieved excellence in creative writing and obtained distinctions of the highest order without any formal schooling. She started writing at the age of 13 and has published 200 works, including more than 100 novels. Obtained Jnanpith Award for her novel *Pratham Pratisruti*, and was the first woman to receive this award. The title Padmashree was also conferred on her the same year, 1976, by the President of India. Vivid and sympathetic portrayal of the lives and loves in middle-class

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Bengal, with an accent on the long-suffering woman who has begun to be aware of herself, characterizes most of her writings. Lives in Calcutta.

Manik Bandyopadhyay (1908-1956)

A powerful writer of fiction in modern Bengal committed to social change as also to the demands of realism. His death at the early age of 48 was a great loss to the progressive Bengali literature. His novel *Putul Nacher Itikatha* is considered to be a pioneering work in psychological fiction. Among his other well-known works are: *Dibaratrir Kavya*, *Padma Nadir Majhi*, *Atasimami*, and *Pragaitihasik*.

Samaresh Basu

Born 1924. One of the most popular writers in contemporary Bengal. He was a member of the Communist Party and took an active part in politics till the fifties, when he devoted himself entirely to creative writing. Has written fifty novels, more than two hundred short stories and five plays. He has progressed steadily from simple stories in the humanistic tradition as in *Adab* to highly complex stories of inter-personal thoughts and behaviour, some of which have caused controversy on account of being opposed to the so-called public morals. Some of his best-known works are: *Nayan Purer Mati*, *B. T. Roader Dhare*, *Shrimati Cafe*, *Akal Brishti* and *Pasarini*. Lives in Calcutta.

Sunil Gangopadhyaya

Born 1935. He is among the most popular writers in the younger age-group. Has published eleven works of fiction, six books of poems and two collections of essays. Two of his novels *Aranyer Din Ratri* and *Pratidwandi* have been made into movies by Satyajit Ray. His stories are uninhibitedly modern seeking to reveal, in the psychoanalytical mode, the hollowness of the modern man, as also the banalities of the social system. Is also an active journalist and works presently for the Bengali Daily—Anand Bazar Patrika, published from Calcutta.

Gopinath Mohanty

Born 1914. An outstanding novelist and short-story writer of Orissa after Independence. The picturesqueness of his language carrying sensuous overtones of the spoken medium, his deep understanding of the lives of Adivasis and his appreciation of the transcendental element in human interactions mark him as a writer of rare distinction in modern

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Indian literature. His best-known works are: *Dadi Burha, Dana Pani. Rahura Chhaya, Harijan, Paraja, Amrutara Santana*, and *Mati Matala*. Among various awards and distinctions received by him are: Jnanpith Award, Sahitya Akademi Award, and the title of Padmabhushan conferred by the President of India. Was a Member of the Orissa Administrative Service; now lives in retirement in Bhubaneswar.

Sachi Rautroy

Born 1916. Known primarily as a poet. In fact the modern elements in poetry, in terms of real-life sensibilities and imagery, may be said to have been introduced by him in Oriya literature. His output in fiction though limited, also marks a stride forward in realism. In his younger days he was known for his revolutionary idealism and his long poem *Baji Raut* translated by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya into English under the title *Boatman Boy*, is considered to be a classic in that genre. Among his prose works *Chitragriba*, carrying psychological meanderings in a sarcastic vein was an innovation in Oriya fiction. Among various awards received by him are: Sahitya Akademi Award and the title Padmashree conferred by the President of India. Lives in Cuttack.

Kishori Charan Das

Born 1924. Writes poems, short stories and essays both in Oriya and English, his forté being the short story. He is considered to be a pioneer in introducing, in minute and vivid detail, psychoanalytical probes into conflicts of the human mind, conscious and sub-conscious, leading to revelations which could possibly offer a glimpse of truth, howsoever tentative, thanks to the dominant tone of irony. His socio-centric stories, relatively few, are however more sarcastic than ironical, carrying an indictment of middle-class values. Has published eight collections of short stories, of which *Manihara* and *Thakura Ghora* are award winners, and a collection of poems in English. Recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, among others. Was a Member of the Indian Audit and Accounts Service. Presently Member (Finance), Assam State Electricity Board, Gauhati.

Manoj Das

Born 1934. Essentially a short-story writer who writes with equal felicity in Oriya and English, and has been widely published outside the state in India and abroad. His stories are marked by abundant compassion for human frailties in a framework of gentle irony and sometimes, in a make-believe atmosphere of romance. The story *Farewell to*

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a Ghost had appeared first in the Malahat Review, University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. *Manoj Dasanka Katha O Kahani* and *The Crocodile's Lady and Other Stories* are his best-known collections of stories in Oriya and English respectively. Among various awards received by him are the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Sarala Puraskar. Works with Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education in Pondicherry.

Dr Krushna Prasad Mishra

Born 1933. A noted writer of fiction in contemporary Orissa, he is known for his intellectual, and quite often philosophic, perceptions as also a keen regard for form and structure in the telling of a story. Has published seven collections of short stories, three novels, one travelogue and one collection of essays. Some of his well-known collections of short stories are: *Kritadasir Kavya, Niagra O Devajani*, and *Paschema*. His novel *Singhakati* has been published in Hindi as *Andheman*. Having obtained a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Toronto in Canada, he teaches philosophy in Utkal University and has also written books on philosophy. Lives in Bhubaneswar.

Chaudhury Hemakanta Misra

Born 1935. Writes short stories and plays. His distinction lies in purveying humour, sometimes through allegories, in a deceptively simple language, designed with a view to expose the vanities and hypocrisies in the current socio-political scene. His principal works are: *Terchha Galpa, Kurulia Galpa, Bhallukara Pura Pant O Anyanya Galpa*, and *Nisiddha Pustaka*, which won the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award. Works for the National Council of Educational Research and Training and lives in New Delhi. ☐

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